

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE CHAUFFEUR'S DEATH





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
CHAUFFEUR'S DEATH**

Worthington is dead! The police finds his car crashed down the cliffs. Jupiter, Pete and Bob are shocked by this piece of news about their friend and long-time chauffeur. Is it an accident? Or is it murder? The Three Investigators are at a loss. What do they actually know about Worthington? When mysterious clues suddenly appear, the three detectives begin to check their friend's past and discover things that they rather have not found. Their powers of deduction are put to the test when more shadows from the past are revealed...

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Chauffeur's Death

*Original German text by
André Marx*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

Translated, adapted, and edited from:

Die drei ???: Tödliche Spur

(The Three ???: Deadly Trail)

by

André Marx

(1999)

Cover art by

Aiga Rasch

(2020-03-23)

Contents

- 1. The Fear of Death**
- 2. An Enemy from the Past?**
- 3. Loss**
- 4. In the Morgue**
- 5. Break-In at a Friend's Place**
- 6. A Hot Trace**
- 7. The Rental Car**
- 8. Three Question Marks**
- 9. 20 April 1984**
- 10. Light into Darkness**
- 11. RR2930**
- 12. A Surprising Phone Call**
- 13. Family Secrets**
- 14. A Chance Discovery**
- 15. The Game Continues**
- 16. Operation Worthington**
- 17. "No Police, Please!"**
- 18. A Reason to Celebrate**

1. The Fear of Death

Jupiter Jones woke up and opened his eyes. It was dark, warm and silent. There was also a musty smell in the air.

He listened. There was not a slightest sound, just the beat of his heart and the rush of blood in his ears. He was lying on something hard, and his back was hurting. Carefully he scanned the ground. Under him was rough, cracked wood. Right next to his shoulders, wooden walls rose up. And above him, his hands hit an obstacle only a few inches from his face. Jupiter got scared. Nothing but wood all around. He was trapped.

Panic rose in him. With all his strength he kicked against the walls. The wood didn't give an inch. There was not even the expected crash, only a muffled thump. Every sound was swallowed immediately. It's like he's... deep underground.

Hectically he pulled a lighter out of his trousers pocket. The small flame illuminated the tiny crate—it was a coffin! He had been buried alive! Fear completely took possession of him. He roared with all his might, drummed against the walls, braced himself against the ceiling—and woke up in his bed.

Jupiter opened his eyes and looked at the green digital display of his alarm clock—2:12 am. Relieved, he relaxed. Then he kicked the blanket away, under which he had sweated like crazy, and took a deep breath.

Jupiter tried to remember what a day it was—Monday. In five hours he had to get up and go to school. Had he really screamed? Perhaps Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda had been awakened by it. He swung out of bed.

His uncle's and aunt's bedroom was on the ground floor. Jupiter crept down the stairs and quietly listened at the door. Soft snoring was heard. Jupiter smiled. He was happy that they hadn't woken up. He would have been very embarrassed by his screaming.

Silently he went back to the stairs. But even before he went up the first step, he heard a familiar humming sound—his stomach.

Jupiter pressed carefully on his stomach. There was clearly a huge hole that needed to be filled. When was the last time he ate something? Six hours ago. No wonder he was hungry.

"No," he whispered to himself. "You will never get rid of the calories you eat at night." He wanted to ignore the growl and go back to bed quickly, but after only three steps his stomach reacted so energetically that he gained control over Jupiter's legs.

As if hypnotized, they followed the call of the fridge and Jupiter couldn't hold on any longer when he saw the cheese, the ham and the remains of yesterday's chocolate pudding. He greedily tried everything and kept telling himself that this was the last time. One last sin before the big diet, which this time he would keep until he had reached his ideal weight. With no sugar, no fat and lots of exercise, he was sure he could just join Pete in his training.

A little frustrated, but full of good intentions, he put the leftovers of his evening meal back in the fridge and went back up to his room.

It was quite cold in his room so Jupe went to the window to close it. Suddenly, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. Were there some movements out there? The First Investigator took a closer look.

He could see out to the salvage yard. Only the light from the street lamps fell over the high wooden fence that bordered the area, transforming the mountains of scrap and rubble into bizarre formations of light and shadow—a familiar sight for Jupiter. He had spent most of his life here.

His eyes wandered attentively from the storeroom where Uncle Titus kept his most valuable treasures, to the office where Aunt Mathilda did the bookkeeping, to the old mobile home trailer where Jupiter and his friends, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews, had set up the headquarters of their detective agency, and to the adjacent workshop...

Everything was very quiet. He must have been mistaken. Jupiter waited a few minutes but nothing moved. Probably it had only been a car whose headlights had fallen through the cracks in the fence.

Just as he was finally about to return to his bed, he saw it again—a light, a shadow. Someone sneaked through the workshop with a flashlight! It was a tall, slender figure. He crept across the yard, but did not approach the storeroom or office. That's all Jupiter could see.

He rushed out of his room, ran down the stairs quietly but swiftly, and rushed to the phone in the hallway. When he picked it up and was about to dial the police number, he paused. The police would take too long. By then the intruder would be long gone. Jupiter hung up and put on Aunt Mathilda's cardigan, which was hanging on the coat rack. Then he slipped into his sneakers and opened the front door. It was uncomfortably chilly.

Jupiter felt that it would take him too long to open the gates of the salvage yard. So he decided to run along the fence and surprise the intruder by entering the yard through Red Gate Rover.

Many years ago, The Three Investigators had built several secret entrances into their headquarters. One of them was called Red Gate Rover, a camouflaged door on one side of the fence of the salvage yard, which could be opened by a hidden trigger. Now, these entrances still exist but not very frequently used.

But when he was about ten metres from the secret entrance, he heard a sound and saw the fence boards swung aside. The intruder had triggered the mechanism and was coming out through the narrow opening of Red Gate Rover! Strictly speaking, nobody—not even Jupiter's uncle and aunt—knew of this secret entrance except Jupiter, Pete and Bob.

Jupiter continued the pursuit, and ran towards the stranger as fast as he could. He had to know who it was! The intruder heard Jupiter's footsteps and turned around, but his face lay in the shadow of the fence. He quickly disappeared around the corner.

When Jupiter reached the corner, he could already hear an engine roar. He saw only the tail lights of the car. Strained, he squeezed his eyes together but he couldn't see the licence plate. Then the car disappeared in the distance.

Jupiter stamped his foot furiously, and went back to close the secret entrance. Then he hurriedly got back into the house to get the keys to the main gate of the salvage yard.

As soon as he entered the yard, he ran over to Headquarters to check. The lock was intact. Then he went over to his workshop. Nothing seemed to be missing. For the next few minutes, he looked around the salvage yard, but he still had no idea what the intruder did.

He then decided that it would be best to block Red Gate Rover from opening—at least temporarily—until they could figure out who the intruder was. He found a suitable wooden wedge and clamped it under the boards.

When he completed doing that, his eyes fell on a small, flashing object. The intruder had dropped something when he escaped.

2. An Enemy from the Past?

“We’ll meet at Headquarters this afternoon,” said Jupiter when he met Pete and Bob in the school yard during the break.

Pete frowned. “I wish to be there, Jupe. Sorry, I can’t today because I’m surfing with Jeffrey. I’ve been looking forward to this for days.”

“Surfing on the Internet?” Bob asked.

“Of course not,” Pete replied irritably, not understanding Bob’s joke. “Ever heard of water, wind and surfboards?”

“It’s important, Pete!” Jupe said impatiently. “We have something urgent to discuss. It’s an emergency, so to speak.”

“Emergency?” Pete asked. “Did someone break into Headquarters?”

“Sort of. We had an intruder last night. Three o’clock sharp at the salvage yard.” With these words Jupiter turned around and walked with quick steps towards the school building.

Bob and Pete looked at him in silence until Bob found his voice and shouted after Jupe: “Hey! Are you serious?”

“Yes!” Jupiter shouted back.

“What happened? Stop right there,” Pete tried to catch up with Jupe.

“No time! I have to go to the library before the next lesson starts,” Jupiter said hastily and disappeared.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Pete, shaking his head. “He can’t leave us hanging like this?”

“Yes, he can,” Bob replied. “He knows you’re coming this afternoon.”

“But I don’t have time!” Pete objected.

“So you don’t want to know about the break-in?”

“Yes, of course. But...” Now it dawned on Pete. “What a jerk,” he growled. “He didn’t have to go to the library. He just wanted to avoid us squeezing him right now.”

“So?” Bob asked. “Did it work?”

“It is so annoying. He always wants it his way.”

Jupiter was sitting at Headquarters thinking about what happened last night when there was a knock on the door. Who could that be? Bob and Pete would just storm into the trailer. “Come in.”

It was Uncle Titus. He looked back as if he was being followed, then quickly closed the door.

“Uncle Titus! What a surprise!” Jupiter remarked. It was rare for Uncle Titus or Aunt Mathilda to come into the trailer. His visit had to have a special reason. The little man with the huge black moustache looked around with interest.

“Let me guess,” Jupiter said. “You need help loading or unloading. Can it wait? Bob and Pete will be here soon, and we have something important to discuss.”

“One of your detective assignments?” whispered Uncle Titus, as if he feared being overheard. “No, don’t worry, Jupe, today you can have a day off. I just wanted to ask if you’ve talked to Worthington yet and have the Rolls-Royce booked for next week.”

Jupiter struck his forehead. "Oh, man! I forgot all about it." Uncle Titus had come up with a special surprise for his wife's birthday, for which he absolutely needed the Rolls-Royce.

Many years ago, around the time The Three Investigators started their detective agency, Jupiter had won a contest organized by the Rent-'n-Ride Auto Agency. The prize was a 30-day use of a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce. When the privilege expired, a former client of the detectives made an arrangement to pay for their continued use of the luxury car. With Worthington as the chauffeur, this arrangement had served the detectives very well for many of their cases. However, since the three obtained their driver's licences and Pete and Bob got their own cars, they only used the Rolls on special occasions.

"Please, Jupe, it's your aunt's birthday! If Worthington is already fully booked because you didn't ask him in time, I have to contact another car rental company. Then it will be expensive. And there's no way I'm driving your aunt in that truck!"

"I will get it done immediately," Jupe said.

"Good. I'm counting on you."

When Uncle Titus had left Headquarters like a conspirator, Jupiter immediately got on the phone. But no one answered when he called Worthington's home number or on the car phone. So he decided to call Mr Gelbert, the boss of Rent-'n-Ride Auto Agency. Jupiter was very reluctant to do this, as he usually always arranged the appointments directly with Worthington. Mr Gelbert did not quite like The Three Investigators very much, especially the fact that the three young lads could come as and when they wanted to rent the car.

"Hello, Rent-'n-Ride Auto Agency?" Jupiter said. "Good afternoon, Mr Gelbert, this is Jupiter Jones from Rocky Beach. Would Worthington happen to be in your office?"

"Jupiter," muttered Gelbert, without the slightest attempt to hide his displeasure. "No, Worthington's not here, unfortunately. He didn't show up for work today, and nobody answered at his home. Usually he is punctual. Today, for the first time, he was absent without notice," he spat out. "Are you sure you three detectives are not behind it this time? I warn you —"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mr Gelbert," Jupiter replied indignantly. "If I had any idea where Worthington was, I'd wouldn't have called you. Please be so kind and tell him that I would like to use his services one week from Friday. Thank you and goodbye."

He hung up. Only a moment later he regretted his rude tone. It wasn't exactly smart to mess with Mr Gelbert. He had the authority to deny them Worthington's services to simply to get one over the three detectives.

But before he could think about it any further, the door swung open and Pete stormed in excitedly, followed by Bob, who gave a much more relaxed impression.

"So, Jupe, shoot!" Pete said hurriedly. "I don't have much time. I have a date on the beach in half an hour. What happened?"

"Come in for a moment," Jupe asked. He didn't want to be pressured by Pete's hurried pace.

Reluctantly, the Second Investigator sat down on a chair and immediately bounced impatiently with his feet.

When Jupiter was sure that he had the full attention of his partners, he described the incident of the previous night in detail.

"Impossible!" cried Bob after hearing the story. "Somebody knows our secret entrance to the salvage yard?"

"And very precisely too," Jupiter confirmed. "Of course, I immediately checked to see if anything had been stolen, but so far I am missing nothing."

"Do you think the intruder was here at Headquarters?" Pete followed up. Worried, he let his eyes wander through the trailer.

"I don't think so," Jupe replied. "The padlock at the entrance was intact."

"If he knows Red Gate Rover, maybe he knows Tunnel Two," Bob remarked, referring to another secret passage that led from the workshop underground to a hatch in the floor of the trailer. "It's unsecured."

"More or less. Down there, we have accumulated a mountain of old files where we did not manage to sort for a long time." As proof, Jupiter opened the floor hatch. The files were still in place. Then he continued: "Tunnel Two is therefore completely inaccessible unless the files are cleared away. But the intruder hardly had enough time for that. At least not if he was here looking for something else."

"Fine, so he probably wasn't at Headquarters but only in the workshop," Pete pondered. "But you say there's nothing missing. What did he do then? And who was he?"

"Someone who's been watching us for some time," Bob said, looking around involuntarily. "Otherwise he wouldn't know our secrets so well."

"When did you last use Red Gate Rover?" Jupe asked. "In my case, it might have been a few weeks or a month ago."

"Sounds about right for me too," Pete said.

Bob also nodded in agreement. "Certainly not in the last three weeks."

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "Then there are four possibilities. Number one: We have already been under surveillance for several weeks without us noticing anything. However, I consider this to be extremely unlikely. After all, we are neither blind nor stupid and would certainly have noticed if someone was tailing us.

"Number two: At some point in the past, someone accidentally noticed that there was a secret entrance to the salvage yard and for reasons unknown so far, only now he has decided to break-in.

"Number three: He discovered the entrance by accident.

"Number four: It's someone we know. After all, Red Gate Rover is not one hundred percent a secret. We already had visitors in our Headquarters from time to time and showed some of them our special equipment and secret passages."

"A friend?"

"Or enemy," Bob added.

"Tall and thin? I can only think of one," said the Second Investigator and his face darkened. "Skinny Norris."

"Skinny? He hasn't been around us for ages," Bob contradicted.

"So what? That doesn't mean he can't come back. I also heard that he visits his parents from time to time. Fortunately, I never ran into him." Pete thought with contempt of their arch-enemy, who had made life difficult for them in many situations. He was quite capable of coming to the salvage yard at night out of sheer malice, just to annoy The Three Investigators.

"No hasty conclusions," warned Jupiter. "We should keep an eye on Skinny as a possible suspect, but so far it's just a hunch."

"We can't do more than guess," Bob said.

"I didn't fully recognize the licence plate of the car in the street light, but I think it was a Los Angeles plate," Jupiter added thoughtfully.

"Fine," grumbled Pete. "That leaves about 9 million people as perpetrators."

"We don't have the slightest clue," Bob agreed. "The licence plate doesn't help us. Nothing was stolen and you didn't see the intruder—so what else?"

“This,” Jupiter replied and triumphantly pulled a metal ring from his pocket, from which three keys were hanging. “Our visitor lost these as he squeezed through Red Gate Rover.”

“And you only say that now?” cried Pete and ripped the key from Jupe’s hand.

At that moment, the phone rang. Jupiter answered, but Bob and Pete were far too busy with the key ring to follow the conversation. They looked at Jupiter’s find with interest.

“We can do something with that,” Pete said quietly, so as not to disturb Jupiter on the phone.

Bob was sceptical. “Yeah what? There are three keys, nothing more—one for the building, one for the apartment door and a mailbox key, I’d say. So all we have to do is to find someone who has an apartment in a tenement building and has his own mailbox. Nothing easier than that.”

“We could put an ad in the paper,” Pete suggested.

“And you think the intruder will answer?” Bob asked.

“Maybe he doesn’t know where he lost the key,” Pete said. “Then he’ll be glad to get it back.”

Bob shook his head. “Think about it, Pete. We’d put your phone number in the paper, mine or Jupe’s. If the intruder knows us, he’ll hang up as soon as he realizes who he’s talking to.”

Pete remained silent for a moment, thinking. “Damn it, there must be something we can do with this bunch of keys! It is not every day that an intruder drops such an important piece of evidence. Jupe should have a plan. Otherwise he wouldn’t have kept the keys from us for so long. You know him, he always makes it extra exciting to make us suffer.”

Pete and Bob looked over at the First Investigator, who hadn’t heard anything of their discussion. He sat completely rigid on his chair, his gaze directed into the void, firmly clutching the telephone receiver.

“Thanks for calling me, Mr Gelbert. Yes, goodbye.” Mechanically and in slow motion, Jupiter hung up and turned to his friends. All colour had disappeared from his face and he stared at them motionlessly.

“Gelbert? What did he want?” Bob asked worriedly.

“Worthington was in a car accident. He is dead.”

3. Loss

In that very moment, Pete and Bob were speechless. But when the First Investigator's facial expression did not change, Pete managed to utter: "Excuse me?"

"It must have happened last night," Jupe elaborated. "Worthington's private car was found this morning on the cliffs west of Malibu. The car crashed through the barriers and rolled down the cliffs. Worthington's body hasn't been found yet, it must have been dragged out into the ocean."

"Oh, my goodness," Bob whispered. "How... how could this happen?"

"Mr Gelbert didn't know. The police just called his house. The car, or what's left of it, is still being examined."

"I don't think so," Pete said, shaking his head. "Worthington can't just..." He stopped. "If his body has not been found... maybe he's still alive!"

"Pete, you know how high the cliffs are at Malibu? The car is probably just a wreck," Jupiter replied dejectedly. "I don't think anybody got out alive."

"Oh, my goodness," Bob repeated. "Worthington, of all people! How... how is that possible?"

No one answered. There was chaos in Jupiter's head. Suddenly his dream from last night of being buried alive came to his mind. Now someone had really died. Worthington was dead.

The First Investigator flinched when Bob broke the silence. "When's the funeral? We have to go there. How do we even approach this? Does Worthington even have any family?"

"I don't know," Jupiter replied without a sound. "There is this distant relative, Fred Hall, but he's in prison. And as far as I know, Worthington hasn't had any contact with him for ages."

Bob looked at his friends in distress. "We don't know much about him!" He tried to hold back tears. "Worthington is our friend! We have experienced so much together and he has helped us so often. And now he's dead and we don't even know if he had family. I mean, he wasn't just Worthington the chauffeur, was he?" He looked from one to another.

Neither Pete nor Jupiter had an answer to this.

It was already getting dark, but Jupiter was still sitting at Headquarters. For a long time, the three friends had stared silently into space and occupied themselves with their own thoughts. Finally Bob and Pete had gone home. Since then Jupiter sat here alone, fortunately untroubled by Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda. He wouldn't want to talk to anyone now.

Again and again, his mind was filled with the memories and experiences they had with Worthington—from their first ride in a Rolls-Royce to the night when they had been involuntarily trapped in a lift. But Bob's question kept getting in the way: Who was Worthington, anyway? What did they know about his life?

Jupiter tried to recall the few facts he knew—Worthington had come from England. He had a distant half-cousin whom he had not liked, had played polo and chess in his spare time—and that was it. Otherwise he seemed to have lived for his profession. Had he ever been married? Or had he had a girlfriend? Jupiter could hardly imagine it.

He was terrified when he realized that he didn't even know Worthington's full name. Polo, chess every Sunday night at a chess club in Los Angeles—that could not be all. Jupiter imagined that Worthington had a huge library of old, leather-bound editions of English literature, read Shakespeare every night and smoked a pipe to accompany it. It's the cliché of a typical Englishman. But that's all that seemed to be left of his long-time friend, as long as he thought about it.

Jupiter tried to imagine what had happened last night. Worthington's car was found west of Malibu. Where was he going? And where had he come from? What had happened on the road? Had the brakes failed? Did he fall asleep at the wheel? Had he been drinking? Worthington had been a chauffeur for the Rent-'n-Ride Auto Agency for twenty years. He drove very safely and conscientiously. A first-class driver like him couldn't just crash his car down a slope.

The First Investigator suddenly became queasy. Had he been forced off the road? Had the brakes been tampered with? Or had Worthington been tied to the wheel and the car crashed? Horror visions ran before his mind's eye and Jupiter was suddenly sure that there was much more behind the whole thing than he had imagined in the hours after the first shock.

He reached for the Los Angeles telephone book and phoned around for a while until he finally reached the chairman of the chess club which Worthington visited once a week.

"Good evening, this is Jupiter Jones speaking. I'm a friend of Worthington's. I would like to check with you whether Worthington was at the club last night."

The man at the other end seemed a little irritated, but then he replied, "No, he wasn't here. I was wondering about that as well. In fact, for the last few years, I can't even remember when he was absent even once. What's wrong with him? Is he sick?"

"I... no, not that. He..." Jupiter stuttered.

"Hello? Are you there? Hello?"

Jupiter hung up. He suddenly felt sick. Telling other people the news of Worthington's death was not something he would do.

So Worthington had not appeared at the chess club. However, the accident had taken place during the night. So something unforeseen must have happened before that.

Again he reached for the phone. This time he dialled the number of Inspector Cotta, the contact person of The Three Investigators with the Rocky Beach Police Department. They had often worked with Cotta and he helped them whenever he could. Although he usually hid behind the façade of a grumpy inspector who was annoyed by the three detectives, Jupiter knew that he was a helpful person.

"Yeah?"

"Good evening, Inspector Cotta. This is Jupiter Jones. I'm glad I caught you at the office."

"You know how it is," grumbled the inspector. "The world is a bad place, ruled by corruption, extortion, theft, murder and manslaughter. For someone like me, that's a reason to put my bed next to my desk. What can I do for you? Who should I arrest?"

"No one yet," Jupiter said. "I'd like some information about a car accident that occurred near Malibu last night."

"Last night there were at least ten accidents near Malibu," the inspector replied.

"This one ended fatally. The car went over the cliff. So far there is no trace of the body, probably the sea has carried it away. I would like to know if the car wreck has been recovered and if the cause of this crash could be determined."

"That case would probably be handled by my colleagues in Malibu, but I can ask around for you. Am I wrong, Jupiter, or is this about something other than your usual

investigations?”

“You are not mistaken,” admitted the First Investigator. “I knew... the driver of the car.” For a moment there was silence. “I’m sorry about that. May I ask who it was?”

“Worthington.”

“Your chauffeur?” Cotta sounded shocked.

“Yes.” Jupiter cleared his throat. “Could you call me as soon as you know anything more specific?”

“Sure. Right away.”

Jupiter did not go into the house until Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus were already fast asleep. But the First Investigator still lay awake and brooding for half the night.

The next day, the three of them gathered at Headquarters. Nobody wanted to be home alone. But even here they did not feel much better. Most of the time they sat around and did not know what to do.

“I still can’t believe it,” Pete broke the silence. “We had many encounters together. Worthington has driven us in so many of our cases—especially back then when we haven’t got cars.”

“I hardly slept,” Jupiter murmured.

“You’re not the only one,” Bob said.

Jupiter nodded in agreement. He had not yet told the two of his suspicions, but wanted to wait for Cotta’s call first.

“How are we actually supposed to proceed with our intruder in this case,” Pete made a half-hearted attempt to put his mind at ease.

“I don’t care about him right now,” mumbled Bob. “I can’t concentrate on anything.”

Pete shrugged his shoulders. Actually, he didn’t care either.

After a while, Jupiter decided to share his thoughts with his friends. He didn’t want to wait for Cotta’s call anymore. “I have something to tell you,” he began. “I’ve done some checking.”

“Regarding the keys?” Bob asked. “You got a lot of nerve. How can you deal with that now?”

“No, not because of the keys. About Worthington. It may sound stupid, but I can’t help feeling that his accident... wasn’t an accident at all.”

“Excuse me?” Pete asked, puzzled.

He told them in detail about his thoughts and the telephone calls the night before.

“You’re crazy,” Pete got upset. “Must you see a mystery behind everything? Isn’t Worthington’s death bad enough?”

“Well, Juve has a point,” Bob thought. “I’ve been thinking about it, too. Worthington is a very good driver. A car accident... that’s the last thing that would happen to him.”

“You’re not really suggesting it was murder?” cried Pete furiously. “This is absurd! You’ve got detective stories on your mind! Who would want to kill Worthington? He had no enemies!”

“How do you know that?” Jupiter looked up. “Bob himself yesterday realized how little we know about Worthington. Maybe he had enemies after all—very dangerous enemies.”

“Do you think he was a drug dealer or gun smuggler or he was in the Mafia?” Pete asked, annoyed. “I beg you, Juve! It was an accident. Nothing else makes any sense.”

The phone interrupted the discussion. Jupiter switched on the loudspeaker and answered. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Cotta here. I have the information you asked for yesterday, Jupiter. It is estimated that the car went off the road in the early hours of the morning, at a time when nobody was driving on the coastal road. Therefore, there are no witnesses to the accident.

“The car is a heap of junk, but forensic technicians have examined it in the meantime and concluded that it was fully functional. No defective brakes, flat tyres or the like. There are also no fresh skid marks on the road.

“It looked as if that the car was driven through the crash barriers at full speed. My colleagues from Malibu suspect that it is a case of microsleep. Unfortunately, it happens very often that motorists overestimate themselves. They feel fit and think they can drive for hours without taking a break. And then they just fall asleep at the wheel.”

“Is there any sign of the driver by now?” Jupiter asked restlessly.

“Yes. A body washed up in Malibu this morning. It has not yet been identified. It is possible that he’s the driver of the car that crashed.”

4. In the Morgue

Jupiter swallowed.

"I'm afraid I can't give you more information at the moment, Jupiter," the inspector continued. "But I have one more important question—my colleagues are desperately looking for a relative of Worthington's who can identify the body as soon as possible."

"Worthington comes from England. I don't know anything about his family. He never talked to us about it," replied Jupiter.

"I was hoping you could tell me more."

"There's a distant cousin," Jupiter reminded him. "Mr Fred Hall. We had dealings with him once. But he's in prison now."

"Like so many people you've dealt with," Cotta murmured. "Let's see what my colleagues have to say about the fact that they have to get someone out of prison to go to the morgue. I'll call you as soon as I know anything new."

"Yes. Thank you, Inspector. Goodbye." He hung up and stared at the phone.

Pete sighed. "All this time I had hoped that maybe Worthington wasn't dead at all, but had just been thrown out from the car. I didn't want to believe that..." He lowered his head.

"He was never here," Bob remarked. "In all the time we've known him, we've never once invited him here. Why not?"

"I don't know," Jupe replied. "We probably never saw him for what he was—a friend. To us he was always just the chauffeur."

They remained silent in dismay. After a while Jupe hesitantly broke the silence. "Don't you think... don't you think that there is something to my theory at all?"

"Stop it, Jupe!" Pete exclaimed. "Worthington is dead and all you can think of is a detective case. How insensitive can you get?"

"It gets to me as much as it is to you," Jupiter answered calmly. "But do you really think Worthington fell asleep at the wheel? No! There is no doubt. Something must have happened the night before last."

"And you want to find out what that is," Pete surmised. "Without me, Jupe. Worthington didn't deserve to have his death treated like one of our usual cases."

"But if I am right, we owe it to him to pursue the matter," Jupiter insisted.

Pete was about to start a reply when the phone rang again.

"The Three Investigators. Jupiter—"

"Yes, Cotta here again. I have a favour to ask of you. Worthington's relative, this Mr Hall, is not willing to identify him. He says he hasn't had any contact with Worthington for years and probably wouldn't recognize him at all."

"Okay, so?"

"Would you be willing to come to Malibu and identify the body?"

Jupiter swallowed hard. "Is that... necessary?"

"Since Worthington has no relatives here—at least none who are available—only friends come into question. And you guys were friends, right? I know it's hard, Jupiter, but it's the only way we can be sure."

The First Investigator looked uncertainly over to his friends. Bob and Pete just shrugged.

“Very well, Inspector Cotta. We’ll go there.”

The trip to Malibu in Bob’s little Beetle was a torture. They all thought the same thing and there was a nervous silence.

Finally, Pete couldn’t take it anymore. “If it’s really Worthington they found, I’m not sure I want to see him. I can’t take it.”

“I don’t want to either!” Bob said.

“Isn’t it enough if one of us goes in?” Pete asked. “Jupe, as our First Investigator, you should be the one to do this.”

Jupiter just nodded.

They reached a part of the coastal road from which one could look directly down the steep coast. Bob looked out the side window into the abyss. A good twenty or thirty metres below them, the waves of the Pacific broke on the rough cliffs. Whoever crashed here...

“Bob! Look out!” Pete shouted.

Bob flinched and instinctively stepped on the brakes. Not a second too soon, because the car in front of him had slowed down without him noticing.

“You almost hit him in the back,” Pete said. “Where are your thoughts?”

“‘Sorry,’ Bob muttered, trying to get his racing pulse under control.

Ten minutes later, they reached Malibu Beach. Cotta had given them the exact directions. The hospital was not far from the centre.

On reaching there, Pete and Bob had decided to follow Jupiter into the hospital, but they were still very reluctant to go and identify the body. Nervously, they entered the modern building and asked the information desk for Dr Bone, where Cotta had referred them to. They were sent to the basement and the doctor was already waiting for them. He was a short, stocky, bald man with a greasy face.

“Good afternoon, you three. You must be Jupiter Jones, uh... Pete and Rob...?”

“Bob,” Bob said. “Bob Andrews.”

“And Pete Crenshaw,” the Second Investigator added uncertainly.

The doctor smiled as if there was a particularly pleasant reason for this. “Come along,” he asked them and led them through a long corridor tiled white from floor to ceiling and lit by cold neon lights. At the end there was a metal door. Dr Bone pushed back a heavy latch. Then he opened the door, activated a light switch and other neon lights flickered up.

The Three Investigators felt the icy air. Reluctantly they entered a large hall, which was also completely white. There were stretchers everywhere, on which bodies covered with cloths laid. Large drawers were set into the walls, in which there were more corpses.

Pete shivered.

“Oh yes,” said Dr Bone in a good mood, “you shouldn’t just be here dressed in a T-shirt. When you come in from the sun outside, it’s a big shock at first. But if you work here for a long time, you get used to it.”

“Indeed,” muttered Bob, who was annoyed by the doctor’s calm.

“It must be so cold here otherwise it will soon start to stink,” explained Bone as he approached one of the stretchers. At the lower end of the cloth the pale feet of a dead body stuck out. A card dangled from the right big toe.

Dr Bone took a look. “Yes, this is him—the man who was pulled out of the Pacific Ocean today. The victim is said to have been involved in an accident.”

Clearly nervous, Pete and Bob stopped and stayed a distance away. Jupiter stared spellbound at the white cloth, under which the contours of a large, slender body were clearly

visible.

“We are not comfortable to do this so I will look first and if necessary, I’ll involve my two friends over there,” Jupiter said.

“Sure. I know it’s not a pretty sight,” said Dr Bone with a surprising hint of genuine compassion in his voice. “Just take a look at him and tell me if it’s your friend.”

The First Investigator swallowed. “Yeah, all right. Can we proceed?”

“Sure.” Dr Bone nodded to him once more in encouragement, then he grabbed the cloth at the head and pulled it back.

5. Break-In at a Friend's Place

"No. That's not him." Jupiter shook his head slowly.

Dr Bone turned to Pete and Bob. "Would you two want to confirm this?"

Obviously relieved, Pete and Bob went over and they too were sure that it was not Worthington.

"Out of the question," Bob said. "We have never seen this man before."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and flipped the cloth back again. "Well, it can't be helped." He sounded almost disappointed and looked at the three of them a little perplexed.

"Let's get out of here." Pete abruptly turned around and hurriedly headed for the exit of the morgue. Without looking back, he raced up the stairs and went straight out of the hospital. Only when he stood in the warm sun and breathed in the fresh air did he stop and close his eyes for a moment.

Bob and Jupiter appeared behind him. "Phew!" moaned Bob. "Thank goodness I don't have to do this every day!"

"Me too," Pete said. "I swear this will be the first and last visit to a morgue for me. This Dr Bone! Have you ever seen such an insensitive person?"

"No wonder," Bob claimed. "If you spend all day dealing with dead people, you probably forget how to deal with living ones."

"It wasn't him," Jupiter suddenly said. An aroused expression sparkled in his eyes. "The dead man isn't Worthington."

"That proves nothing," Pete said. "He can still swim around in the ocean somewhere."

But the First Investigator shook his head decidedly.

"I don't think so anymore. It would be too many coincidences," Jupiter explained. "Think about it—Worthington has led a perfectly regular life for twenty years. He chauffeurs rich people, he plays chess, he plays polo—week after week without exception. He probably hasn't taken a single vacation in the last twenty years. And one day he doesn't show up at the chess club, drives along the coast road in the middle of the night and races into the abyss. His body remains missing. That was no ordinary accident, my friends. We have to find out what really happened."

"But that won't bring him back to life either," Pete contradicted with little conviction. "If he's even dead."

"What do you mean?" Juve asked. "What are the chances of someone being ejected from a car and hurled out to the sea? And more importantly, how likely is this in connection with the other strange incidents? No, fellas. I'm convinced there's something fishy about this. And we should take care of it." As if the matter had been decided, Jupiter did not wait for an answer, but walked past the two of them to the car.

Only on the return journey Pete dared to ask: "And how do you explain the whole story then? If Worthington's not dead, I mean? What happened instead?"

"Maybe he was kidnapped and his death was faked," Juve said. "And so that no one would look for him."

"Kidnapped? Who would kidnap Worthington?" Pete remained sceptical. "And besides, kidnapping is a common way to extort ransom. By whom? And how, when everyone thinks

he's dead?"

"How should I know?" Jupiter said. "It was just a thought. We'll just have to investigate."

Pete shook his head thoughtfully. "I also don't know. Aren't we just clinging desperately to the idea that he's alive after all? We could get pretty banged up on this."

"Even if he's dead, there is a case to be made because the police will not pursue this matter any further," Jupe said. "For them, it was an accident."

"But if it wasn't an accident, then it could be murder!" Pete asked. "And we should definitely leave that alone. No, Jupe, I know what you're going to say—we have a duty as detectives, we'll investigate anything and so on. I'm not taking any of this! I'm out of it!" No one answered. Pete turned to Bob, from whom he hoped for support. "Say something, Bob!"

"Well," Bob hesitantly began. "I actually share Jupe's opinion. There's something fishy about it. And until we know if Worthington is really dead or what happened to him, I don't mind investigating by ourselves."

"But—" Pete began to say something.

"If it gets really dangerous, we can always call Inspector Cotta," Jupiter interrupted.

Pete pulled a face. "You say that every time. Most of the time it ends up with us being up to our necks in trouble and not having a chance to call the police."

"But so far it has gone well," Jupiter reminded him.

"So far. There's always a first time for everything," Pete said, annoyed. "One day we won't be able to get our heads out of the noose. But then it will be too late and you will remember my words with remorse."

"Don't be so theatrical, Pete," Jupiter moaned.

Pete remained silent and insulted. But on the long drive back to Rocky Beach he had time to think about the new situation. When they finally reached the salvage yard and got out of the car, he asked timidly: "How should we proceed?"

Bob and Jupiter smiled at each other.

"Don't take this the wrong way! I am still against it!" Pete said quickly. "But I can't let you run off alone to do this."

"It's clear," Jupiter replied calmly. "I have imagined our further course of action like this—we know that Worthington's life went off the rails on Sunday night. But what do we know about his life? Almost nothing. So the first thing we should do is to deal with it. We need to go to his apartment and look for clues—a letter or a call on the answering machine or something. Maybe we can find out what happened."

"You want to break into his apartment?" Pete was appalled. "We can't do this!"

"Don't pretend we've never walked into people's apartments before," Jupe snapped.

"In other people's homes, that's right," Pete argued. "But Worthington is not a stranger, not a suspect, but a friend. We can't just rummage through his private things!"

Jupiter rolled his eyes. "Nobody is talking about rummaging anything. We're just looking for a clue. If we don't find anything concrete, we'll just leave."

"And how are we supposed to get into his apartment?" Pete asked.

Now Jupiter grinned broadly. "I think you know best, Pete."

Pete moaned. He was the one who had an extensive lock pick collection. And he was also the only one who could handle it sensibly. "I feel abused," he muttered.

It was already getting dark when they set off for Los Angeles. Worthington lived on Wilshire Boulevard, one of the major high streets leading from Santa Monica to downtown Los

Angeles. It was slow going. The cars were jammed by the dozens at every traffic light, constantly accompanied by an incessant honking concert.

The closer they got to their destination, the more nervous Pete became. But he forced himself to keep quiet. There would have been no point in objecting again anyway. Once again he had been outvoted by Jupiter and Bob. Would it ever be different?

When they finally reached number 2895, it was pitch dark. Jupiter looked at his watch—it was shortly after nine. The apartment where Worthington lived was a large tenement block where at least thirty tenants lived.

Worthington had once mentioned that his apartment was on the top floor. The front door to the building was opened. Inside there was a sign saying ‘Please close the door at 8 pm’, but nobody seemed to care. All the better for the three detectives.

Unseen, they climbed the grubby stairs. They heard rap music booming from somewhere. They could hardly imagine that Worthington had lived in this building for so many years. His noble nature was in stark contrast to the run down corridors he had to walk through daily.

“This is what it looks like,” muttered Pete as they reached the top of the stairs and his eyes fell on some dried-up plants on the window sill. A black cat, which had just wandered across the corridor, scurried past them from left to right to the fire escape.

“A black cat!” Bob whispered happily. “That must be good luck!”

“Mistake,” Pete gloomily contradicted. “My grandma always says—from right to left, that’s good. From left to right, that’s bad.”

“What nonsense,” mumbled Jupiter as he continued walking past them in the corridor. There were six apartments at the top floor, three on each side. The last door on the right had Worthington’s name.

“Here it is,” Jupiter said. “Come on, Pete, get to work before anyone sees us.”

The Second Investigator looked closely at the lock and took out his black case. Hesitantly he chose one of the lock picks and started poking around the keyhole.

“I find that fascinating,” Bob said. “I could never do that.”

“Don’t praise me too soon. This lock’s got it all. Worthington made sure that no one breaks into his apartment easily. So would I, in this place.” Pete kept on trying, but with no success.

“I can’t believe what I’m doing,” Pete murmured.

“Shh!” Jupiter suddenly hissed. “Someone’s coming!”

They listened as heavy steps rumbled up the stairs.

The Three Investigators waited, but it sounded as if the person was approaching them. “Quickly! We’ll come back later,” whispered the First Investigator. “Just keep cool!”

Pete stuffed his lock picks in his pocket and they strolled down the corridor back to the stairs. A fat woman came towards them. She had a burnt cigar butt in the corner of her mouth and was carrying two heavy shopping bags.

Suspiciously, she looked at The Three Investigators who nodded briefly in greeting and walked past her down the stairs. On the landing of the floor below, they waited until they heard an apartment door close. When it was quiet again, they turned back.

“Well, hurry up,” urged Jupiter, when Pete tried to pick the lock for the second time.

“You’re welcome to do the work,” hissed the Second Investigator. “This is some kind of special lock, I don’t know, I’ve never dealt with anything like this before.”

“You’ll be all right,” Bob encouraged him.

“Of course I can make it. It just takes longer.” But at that moment the lock jumped open with a click and the door could be opened. “Well, how did I do that?”

“First class. Get in!” Juve cried.

They entered the apartment and locked the door from the inside.

“We can’t switch on the lights in the living room as it can be seen from the corridor outside,” Jupiter noted, so the three used their flashlights. “I think at the back rooms, we can turn on the ceiling lights.”

Slowly they wandered through the different rooms and looked around. The apartment was furnished exactly as they had imagined—with old, dark furniture and carpets. The apartment didn’t fit the exterior of the building at all. Rather, it looked like an old English country house.

The living room was extremely simple. Apart from a television, a heavy leather suite and a noble chess game on the coffee table, there was nothing much. The kitchen and bathroom were also kept simple.

The study, on the other hand, was stuffed to the ceiling with books. In front of the window was a large telescope, next to it was a star chart on the wall. Otherwise, there was only room for a desk, on which, to their amazement, there was a computer.

The bedroom was furnished as simply as possible. Jupiter involuntarily had to think of Aunt Mathilda, who would have decorated this room with all kinds of decorative trinkets. There were only a few personal items—a few trophies that Worthington had won in chess tournaments, a mini-bar, Scotch whisky and Californian wine. On a dresser were three or four family photos, showing Worthington, about twenty years younger, with his parents and a young woman, perhaps his sister. Bob looked at her with interest. A certain family resemblance could not be denied.

“What are we looking for?” Pete whispered. “There are no clues here. This apartment looks exactly like one for a real Brit. We didn’t have to come here at all, I told you so. We—”

”Quiet!” Jupe snapped.

“Why?” Pete snarled, annoyed. “Why don’t you admit you made a mistake, Jupe? We—”

“Shut up!” hissed the First Investigator and put his index finger on his lips.

Pete realized that Jupiter had heard something. Listening, he tilted his head to the side. There was actually a noise. It sounded like...

“Someone’s at the door!” Bob whispered.

6. A Hot Trace

“Quick, lights out!” hissed Jupiter.

It was dark in the apartment and they panicked looking around in semi-shade. And now, there’s no place to hide!

“The fire escape,” Bob whispered, pointing to the living room window.

The First Investigator nodded. They opened a window and climbed out onto the metal scaffolding. Then they closed the window again and hid themselves so that they could not be seen from inside. The traffic of Los Angeles rushed by beneath them.

Bob carefully risked a look inside the apartment. “Here comes someone! He has a flashlight. He too, might have picked the lock.”

“And?” Pete asked.

“I only see the flashlight,” Bob whispered. “I can’t make this guy out. Now he goes into the study.”

“Where do we go from here? We could climb down and call the police,” Pete suggested.

“And how shall we explain to the police why we are here?” Bob asked. “Let’s just get out of here!”

“By the time the police get here, the guy might be gone,” Jupiter thought. “And then we’ll never find out who it is and what he wants in Worthington’s apartment. No, we’re staying.”

For five minutes, nothing happened. Then Bob reported: “He’s coming back! And now he disappears into the bedroom.”

“He’s looking for something,” Pete said.

Again the intruder was not to be seen for a while. Finally, he walked from one of the back rooms, out into the living room and soon, the fumbling beam of the flashlight disappeared.

“He left the apartment!” Bob whispered.

“Quick, Bob, climb down the fire escape and follow that man! We need to know he is! We’ll take another look around the apartment. If you need to leave, meet us back at Headquarters.”

“Aye, sir!” Bob hurried down the metal steps.

“Hopefully he won’t get caught,” Pete said worriedly as he opened the window and climbed back into the apartment. He looked around again, but the stranger had actually disappeared. But he had not been particularly considerate during his short visit.

“Look at this!” cried Jupiter from the study. “He ransacked the place!”

Pete went over to inspect. The papers, which had been carefully arranged and stacked on the desk, were now spread all over the place. The drawer was open. The mess was not too big, but that was because Worthington didn’t have a lot of things that could have been messed up.

“He was really looking for something,” Pete noted. “The trouble is, we don’t know if he’s found it. Who was that guy?”

“Hopefully Bob will be able to tell us,” Jupiter said. “Let’s get out of here!”

The two left the apartment and ran down the stairs.

“Oh, no!” Pete suddenly moaned. “If Bob’s really following this guy, how are we gonna get home?”

“By bus,” Juve said. “It takes forever, but it’s cheaper than a taxi.”

But when they stepped out into the street, Bob was waiting for them with sloping shoulders.

“Bob! What’s wrong?” Jupiter asked.

“I climbed down as fast as I could. But the guy was faster. He was already getting into his black BMW when I dropped from the fire escape onto the sidewalk. By the time I got to my car, he was long gone. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Jupiter consoled him. “What did he look like?”

“I only saw him from behind. He was not very tall and was bald. That’s all I can tell you. But I have his licence plate number,” Bob proudly announced. “Wrote it down immediately so I won’t forget it.” Triumphant he waved his notebook.

“Wonderful! With Cotta’s help, this should be worth as much as an ID card.” Then Jupiter told Bob the mess they had seen in Worthington’s apartment.

“I hope you now believe me that this case is far more mysterious than it initially seemed,” Juve concluded. “I must confess that I still have no idea what is going on, but with the help of this licence plate number we will get to the bottom of it.”

The following school day went by endlessly slowly. The Three Investigators couldn’t wait to meet back at Headquarters.

Pete was now enthusiastically involved. The unknown man who had entered Worthington’s apartment last night had changed the situation decisively. They had a hot lead and wanted to follow it up without delay.

When they finally met at Headquarters in the afternoon, Jupiter immediately got on the phone and called Inspector Cotta. His friends hung spellbound on the loudspeaker to hear every word.

“Good afternoon, Inspector. It’s me, Jupiter.”

“Ah, hello, Jupiter. I already heard—the dead man wasn’t Worthington. In the meantime, his identity has been established as a man from Santa Monica who tried to swim in the Pacific Ocean in an alcoholic state and drowned. Tragic, but irreversible. Unfortunately, we still have no further leads on the Worthington case.”

“That is regrettable,” said Jupiter. “But I have a favour to ask of you.”

Cotta seemed to have sympathy for Jupiter, for this time he did not sigh, but asked politely, “What can I do for you?”

“I have a licence plate number here, and I need the name of the owner of the vehicle.”

But Cotta sighed. “You know very well that’s not possible, Jupiter.”

“Yes, indeed,” replied the First Investigator.

“It’s against the privacy regulations if I identify a car number for private purposes—what is it?”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “TCR120. But it’s not for personal use at all.”

Through the loudspeaker, they could hear Cotta typing something into the computer at the other end of the line. “As long as they are not directly related to police work, such requests are purely private in nature,” he contradicted. “Sorry for you three, but I have rules to follow.”

“We understand that, sir, but—” Jupiter began to say.

“I simply cannot tell you that this is a car from ‘Timothy Car Rentals’ in Los Angeles—absolutely impossible. By now you should really know that and not ask me for these things anymore.”

“All right, sir. I get the picture,” Jupiter replied. “It will not happen again.”

Cotta laughed. “And now, have a nice day, I’m busy.”

“Thank you, Inspector. Thanks a lot.”

“I wouldn’t know what was that for,” Cotta remarked and hung up.

“Wow!” cried Pete. “Cool! We’ve done it! Cotta is a true friend.”

“That’s him,” Bob agreed. “But we haven’t done anything yet. The number belongs to a rental car. We still don’t know who was behind the wheel.”

“We’ll figure that out,” Jupiter claimed.

“And how?” Pete asked. “You think the rental car people are just gonna hand over the name? They are also bound by privacy regulations.”

“I’ll think of something,” Jupiter said confidently. “Come on, fellas, let’s go to Timothy Car Rentals!”

“Do you have a plan yet?” Bob asked, astonished.

“No, but I’ll figure something out on the way.”

7. The Rental Car

The car rental company was located on the coast, near Hughes Airport. The Three Investigators were glad that this time they did not have to drive all over Los Angeles to reach their destination.

"How are you going to get the name?" Pete wanted to know when he parked his car a short distance away from the company's premises.

"How many times are you gonna ask me that?" Jupiter quipped.

"Until you give me an answer," Pete quipped.

"I don't know yet. I'll tell some weird story, and they might just give me the name. Maybe you two had better stay in the car and remain unseen. I may need you later."

"All right. Good luck!" Pete said.

Jupiter raised his thumb. "It'll be fine." Confidently, he entered the building.

A young woman sat behind the counter and worked on the computer. She was wearing a 'Timothy Car Rentals' T-shirt and looked up smiling when she saw Jupiter.

"Hi, I'm Gina. What can I do for you?"

"Well, this is a somewhat difficult story," the First Investigator began and put on a confused and silly expression. "Yesterday, by chance, I ran into a friend of mine. That is... uh... I didn't just meet him. That's just the problem. I saw him. Just seeing, you know?"

Gina shook her head.

"He was in one of your cars. At least I think so. The TCR on the licence plate stands for 'Timothy Car Rentals', right? My uncle rented a car from you once, that's how I know. He came to visit from Europe and of course he could not take his car with him. But here in Los Angeles, you gotta have wheels, right? I mean, the bus routes aren't exactly the real thing, and the one subway there is... I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. After all, this is your business—renting out cars. Right?" He laughed and nodded at Gina to cheer her up.

She wrung a smile from herself and kept staring at him with big eyes. "So what can I do for you?"

Jupiter tapped his finger against his forehead. "Of course I'm not here to tell you about my uncle," he said apologetically. "It's about my friend. Er... Jim. Jim Burton. I saw him yesterday, I told you. And I really haven't met him in a long time. We used to live on the same street, you know. But at some point, we lost touch of each other. The town is so big, and maybe he moved."

"And this... Jim was driving one of our cars," Gina tried to help him out.

"Right. And I would so like to see him again sometime. Jim, I mean. But I don't know where he lives. Jim, I mean."

"All right," said Gina with understanding.

"Right. You do have the addresses of your customers, don't you? If something happens or something. Then you must have his address, right?"

"We have, right," she replied. "But I'm not really supposed to give them out."

"Well, yes, I understand that—privacy and all that stuff. But you're my only hope. I've got to get this address somehow. I saw the licence plate number so that you can look it up on your computer. It's all in the computer, isn't it?"

“Sure. But as I said, I am not at liberty to give out that information.”

“But I’m sure Jim wouldn’t mind,” Jupiter assured her, “On the contrary. He would be very grateful if he could see an old friend again with your help. The number is TCR120.”

He put on his friendliest smile. In the meantime, he probably got on the nerves of the lovely Gina a bit. “It’s not like we normally do this.” She was starting to go soft.

“Yes, yes, you said that already. But surely you can make an exception.”

“All right.” Sighing, she sat down at the computer and called up some menus.

Jupiter watched her closely. Unfortunately he couldn’t read what was on the screen, he was too far away for that.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to disappoint you,” Gina finally said in surprise. “The car is currently on loan, but not to a Jim Burton.”

“Darn it!” cried Jupiter and snapped his fingers. “His name isn’t even Burton! I mean, I’m not 100% sure his name was Burton. My memory for names is not so good, you know. Jim... Jim... help me out.”

“Not Jim at all.”

“Then what?”

“Well, I really can’t tell you that,” Gina replied indignantly. She quickly clicked away the information from the screen.

“Not Jim?” he asked sadly.

“Not Jim. You must be mistaken.”

“Well then,” said Jupiter with a shrug and turned around. “Thank you very much for your help.”

“You’re welcome.”

Jupiter left the office with shuffling steps and drooping shoulders. He got back into the car where Pete and Bob waited impatiently.

“So? Did you get the name?” Pete asked.

“No,” growled Jupiter. “I had her checking the information. But I couldn’t read the name. And she didn’t tell me.”

“What a bummer,” Pete cursed. “Now what?”

“Now we need a new plan. And I think I know how we can do it this time,” Jupiter said, pondered for a while and then grinned broadly. “That should work. Now I need your help.”

“Well, go ahead and shoot!” Pete cried.

Five minutes later, Pete entered the ‘Timothy Car Rentals’ office and looked very rushed. In his hand he held a bunch of keys, which he played around with nervously.

“Hi, I’m Gina. What can I do for you?”

“Hello. I just have a quick question. Was there a chubby boy here with dark hair, about my age?”

Gina smiled. “Yes. He left five minutes ago.”

“Oh? Do you know which way?”

“Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention,” Gina confessed.

“Thanks anyway,” said Pete, turning around and hurrying outside.

Half a minute later, Bob came in.

“Hi, I’m Gina. What can I do for you?”

“I just wanted to enquire about the prices of rental cars,” Bob replied and looked at the counter.

“Here, you can take a look at this,” Gina suggested and handed him a leaflet.

“Thank you. I’ll look at it outside.” Bob turned around, but just before he opened the door, he looked over his shoulder and said, “By the way, someone dropped some keys here.”

Then he went out.

It only lasted a moment, then Gina stormed out of the office, keys in hand, and searched the company grounds for Pete. She discovered him on the sidewalk, some fifty metres away. For a moment, she seemed to hesitate, looking around for customers, but only saw Bob standing just outside the entrance looking at the leaflet. Then she sprinted off to catch up with Pete.

Jupiter came running around the corner of the office.

“Hurry!” hissed Bob. “You’ve got a minute at the most!”

“On my way!” Jupiter pushed the door open, ran around the counter and sat down at the computer. He had been watching Gina closely. It should be no problem to get into the system and retrieve the information he wanted.

Bob took turns looking through the window in the doorway at Jupiter, who was feverishly doing something on the computer, and over to Pete, who was caught up by Gina at that moment.

From a distance, Bob could see that Pete was trying to get into a conversation with her in order to buy Jupiter as much time as possible. But she didn’t let herself be held up for long. She turned around after a few moments and hurried back to her workplace.

Bob, apparently engrossed in the leaflet, knocked on the door behind his back. Jupiter had to get out of there right away! But the First Investigator remained seated facing the monitor. Hadn’t he heard the warning?

In the meantime, Gina was already approaching the entrance and she definitely would have seen Jupiter if he left the office now. Bob immediately went up to Gina. “Oh, excuse me, I have one more question.”

She stopped. “Yes?”

“Is there a student discount on rental cars? The daily rate is pretty high, I can’t afford it.”

“No, unfortunately.” She shook her head regretfully and wanted to walk past him.

“And what about motorcycles?” Bob asked quickly.

“We don’t rent motorcycles,” was the answer. “I’m sorry, but I have to go in. I hear the phone ringing.”

“But I...” Bob couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Just a moment, I’ll have time for you again in a moment!” Gina shouted back over her shoulder. Then she entered the office.

8. Three Question Marks

Bob closed his eyes and waited for the outraged cry when Gina discovered the First Investigator at her desk. But the scream did not come. When Bob opened his eyes again and risked a look through the window, he saw Gina on the phone. There was no sign of Jupiter.

Bob waved frantically to Pete. Pete came back in a big arc to the corner of the building so that Gina couldn't see him through the window.

"Jupe has gone!" Bob whispered excitedly as he went up to Pete.

"What?"

"He must be hiding in there somewhere," Bob said. "How are we gonna get him out? We can't possibly distract Gina a second time!"

"That won't be necessary," said a voice behind them.

"Jupe! Where did you come from?" Bob cried.

"From the toilet," Jupe replied. "The computer application was quite tricky so it took me a bit of time. Then I saw that Gina was coming and I could not disappear unseen. So I ducked into the toilet and climbed out the window."

Pete couldn't help laughing. "You climbed? I wish I could have seen that!"

"My plan worked, it's all that matters," Jupiter hissed.

"So? Did you get the name?"

The First Investigator smiled. "Sure I did—George MacDunno, age forty-six, born in Stonehaven, Scotland."

"Uh-huh." Pete was a little disappointed. "And who is he?"

"That's the next question we have to answer," Jupe said. "But now we should leave before Gina comes out and sees us together."

"George MacDunno," muttered Jupiter as they returned to Headquarters. "How do we get something out of him?"

"I can only think of one way," Bob said.

"Cotta?" Pete expressed the thought. "He'll thank us nicely if we get on his nerves again."

"On the other hand, we now have something solid," Jupiter pondered. "MacDunno has broken into Worthington's house. The police must investigate."

"And at the crime scene they will find our fingerprints," Pete continued. "Excellent."

"I'll just give him a call," Jupiter ended the discussion and picked up the phone. But there was no answer at Cotta's office. Eventually the call was forwarded to someone else.

"Good afternoon, I would like to speak to Inspector Cotta," Jupiter said.

"The inspector is on duty at the moment," explained a grumpy voice.

"When is he coming back?"

"Not for today. He said he was going straight home afterwards."

"Fine," said Jupiter. "Then I'll try again tomorrow." Frustrated, he hung up. "Cotta is not available until tomorrow. We have to find a solution ourselves."

The Three Investigators spent the whole afternoon thinking. They suspected that MacDunno had come from the UK and had rented a car here. It was assumed that he lived in a hotel or boarding house. But there were hundreds of hotels in and around Los Angeles. It was impossible to call and ask them.

Meanwhile, Pete got tired of thinking and had nothing else to do. He got hold of a portable vacuum cleaner from the salvage yard office and proceeded to clean up the trailer.

Bob decided to use the time to sit down at the computer to update their records. In the last few weeks, many files with case reports and letters had accumulated that needed to be sorted. They probably never needed half of it again, so Bob, who was responsible for research and records, regularly made it his business to archive or delete information to save storage space.

"I could try to find out something from my father," Bob said, while he was listlessly arranging some CDs. Mr Andrews worked for the *Los Angeles Times*, a major newspaper and had often been of great help to the three detectives by getting newspaper archives. "But of course we'd only be successful if Baldy MacDunno had ever done a thing—a thing so big that the newspaper reported it."

"Better than nothing. We have to start somewhere," Pete said as he was taking out some loose carpets from the trailer and bringing them outside to beat out the dirt. When he removed the carpet at the door, he saw a square envelope underneath it. "Hey! What's this?" He held up the envelope. "It looks like a CD sleeve! Is this one of ours, Bob?"

"Let me see!" Jupiter took it in his hand. He opened the envelope and took out a yellow CD without a label. Someone had drawn three big question marks on it with a black pen. "Interesting!"

They looked at each other questioningly. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" the First Investigator finally broke the silence.

"Our nocturnal visitor?" Bob said.

"He has not stolen anything, but has brought us something," Pete finished the thought. "He slipped it under the door and it went underneath the carpet!"

"Insert the disk!" Jupiter instructed.

Bob pushed it into the drive and took a look at the directory. "A single text file. Tiny little text file. Let me open it." He clicked on the icon, the computer loaded the file and the following text appeared on the screen:

London, 20 Apr 1984

RR2930

W.

"Then what?" Pete asked.

"That's all," Bob replied.

"This is all that's on the disk? A place, a date, a few letters and numbers and a mysterious 'W'? What is this?" Pete questioned.

"'RR2930' and 'W'." The First Investigator hit his thighs. "Of course! It's very clear to me now that the 'W' is the sender—Worthington!"

"Worthington?" cried Pete, thunderstruck. "Worthington was here? What makes you so sure? 'W' could stand for anything."

"It's not just the 'W'. It's also the 'RR2930' that tells me that it is Worthington!" Juve exclaimed.

“What’s ‘RR2930’?” Pete asked.

“I don’t know,” Bob confessed. “Maybe a code? A password? A combination for a safe? I don’t know.”

“Think, people!” Jupe said. “Worthington has given us a clue that he thinks we’ll understand. It must have something to do with him and us.”

“With him and us?” Pete said, puzzled. “Come to think of it, it does look familiar to me, but off-hand I can’t recall. Would you please take me out of this?”

Jupiter stared at the two of them. “You are so blind! The Rolls-Royce! RR2930 is the licence plate of the Rolls-Royce!”

“You are right!” Bob cried. “We really are idiots. The Rolls is so unique that we never really bothered about its licence plate.”

“Now it all makes sense!” Jupiter cried. “Worthington knows our Headquarters. He never came here, but we told him often enough about our secret entrances and exits. The intruder I surprised was tall and thin, just like Worthington.”

“But... but what is all this all about?” Pete asked.

“Worthington knew something was going to happen that night. Maybe he suspected that our mysterious Mr MacDunno was after him. So he left a note for us. For some reason he didn’t want to inform us personally. And he didn’t want to go to the police.”

“But... but...” Pete could find no words. “What’s Worthington trying to tell us? And why is it so mysterious?”

“He wanted to prevent this information from falling into the wrong hands. That was probably what MacDunno was looking for last night. Worthington put the disk in a safe place because he knew nobody would find it here and we could do something with it.” Jupiter rubbed his hands in excitement.

“But we can’t do anything with it,” Pete objected. “I certainly don’t.”

“They’re clues,” Bob thought. “Worthington wants us to find out what happened in London on 20 April 1984, and there is something about the Rolls.”

“Now I suggest that we tackle this one by one, starting with the date,” Jupiter suggested. “Maybe we’ll be smarter once we decode it. Then we’ll think about the car later. Bob, how long will your father be in the newsroom today?”

“Probably until 5:00 or 5:30.” Bob said.

The First Investigator looked at his watch. “If we hurry, we can still make it. We’ll look around the archives of the *Los Angeles Times* and leaf through the 1984 newspapers. Maybe we can find something that’ll help us.” He jumped up.

“Oh yes, there’s another reason to go back to L.A. today,” Jupiter continued. “Because there we can test this theory. Remember? The intruder lost a bunch of keys. If it really was Worthington, these keys would be for his apartment.”

Five minutes later, they sat in Bob’s Beetle and set off again for L.A. The eternal honking concert in the city centre tore at their nerves as they drove along Venice Boulevard.

“I hate this city,” Pete cursed. “If the traffic remains like this, we won’t make it to the newsroom in time.”

“Don’t panic. My dad’s probably working a little overtime again,” Bob said calmly. “Nevertheless, I would suggest that we make the detour to Worthington’s apartment on the way back.”

“Agreed,” Jupiter said. At that moment, he looked at the side mirror to see the traffic behind them. “Uh oh. I’m afraid traffic isn’t our only problem.”

“Then what is it?” Pete asked.

“I wasn’t sure at first, but now I think we’re being followed. A black BMW has been following us since we left Rocky Beach.”

“So what? This is the main line from the coastal cities to Los Angeles.”

“I’ve been looking at it from the mirror for a while. He never attempted to overtake us, though he had plenty of opportunity to do so,” Jupiter said. “Instead, he has been constantly two cars behind us for half an hour. Wasn’t it also a black BMW that our dear MacDunno rented?”

Bob winced. “Right! Juve, in the glove compartment, there’s a pair of binoculars. Maybe you can see what he looks like and perhaps the licence plate as well.”

“A pair of binoculars? Why is this in your car? Do you spy on hot women in your spare time?” joked Pete.

“Don’t be silly. You better check and see if you can see anything.” Bob said as Jupiter handed the binoculars to the Second Investigator who was seated at the back.

“I see the car. And the guy behind the wheel wears sunglasses, you can’t see much of him either. He’s driving too close. I can’t see the licence plate. Wait! He is overtaking the car in front of him. Aha!”

“What?” Bob asked.

“The licence plate number is TCR120!”

9. 20 April 1984

“Baldy MacDunno is following us!” Bob cried. “But why? He doesn’t even know who we are! He doesn’t even know we exist!”

“Did he perhaps see you when you climbed down the fire escape, Bob?” Jupe asked.

“No! Certainly not! He has no idea we were in the apartment. What does he want from us?”

“Perhaps he was monitoring us before we even knew he existed,” Pete thought.

“Goodness, this case is getting confusing. What do we do now?”

“Lose him,” said Jupiter.

Bob laughed. “You’re funny, Jupe. How am I supposed to outrun him in this traffic? I can’t just step on the accelerator and speed away. The streets are full! Would you like to take the wheel?”

The First Investigator pinched his lower lip. “I got it. We’re going to the next multi-storey car park.”

“Then what?” Bob asked.

“Then I’ll get out immediately, pay the parking fee at the machine while you drive up to the top floor. MacDunno will most likely follow you. When you get to the top, you immediately come straight down, I’ll get in and we can leave the car park.”

Pete was sceptical. “And what’s the point of doing that?”

“MacDunno can’t just drive out. He must pay first. And since he is alone in the car, he has to get out and go to the pay machine. We’ll be long gone by then.”

“Great idea,” Pete admitted.

“There’s a multi-storey car park up ahead. Let’s try it!” Bob put his indicator on and turned into the driveway. He pulled a card, the barrier opened and he drove up the ramp. He stopped briefly on the first floor, Jupiter jumped out with the parking ticket and hid behind a concrete pillar. Bob drove on. A moment later, Jupiter watched the black BMW following Bob’s Beetle. The First Investigator sprinted to the pay machine and paid.

A minute later, Bob came back to the first floor. Jupiter opened the door, jumped into the car and they drove to the exit. The BMW was still behind them. The barrier accepted the parking ticket and opened. Bob quickly caught up with the traffic. Jupe’s plan worked. MacDunno stayed behind—cursing, as The Three Investigators had hoped.

“He’s got something he can get angry about,” Pete said happily. “Still, I find it rather disturbing that this guy obviously knows about us and our Headquarters at the salvage yard.”

“Another reason for us to solve this case as soon as possible. Let’s go to the *Los Angeles Times*.”

They reached the newspaper office just in time. Mr Andrews was about to leave. He saved himself the trouble of asking curious questions. He had enough experience from the past that his son and his friends usually told him about their cases after they had long been over. He only hoped that they did not put themselves in unnecessary danger.

“You know your way around,” he said when they entered the archives. “But don’t stay too long. Mrs Grayson will be off work soon. I’m getting out of here now. Will you be with

your parents at dinner tonight for a change, Robert?"

Bob shrugged his shoulders in embarrassment. "I can't promise anything. We're on the trail of something hot right now."

"Well, I wasn't expecting anything else." Mr Andrews looked at his son seriously. "Be careful, whatever you're doing." He raised his hand in parting and left the room.

The newspaper archives was a huge basement room. Countless volumes of the *Los Angeles Times* and other newspapers were stored here in thick, bound books, one for each week. More recent editions were stored on microfilm, but the 1984 vintage was still on the shelves in its original form.

Mrs Grayson, who worked down here, welcomed The Three Investigators with a smile. "What are you looking for?"

"April 1984. Preferably everything from the second half of the month."

"Top of the fourth shelf on the left," she replied from the top of her head.

"Do you have newspapers from England too?" Jupiter asked.

"*The London Times* has been here since 1988, but you have to make do with our paper for everything that was before," Mrs Grayson said.

They found the corresponding volumes quite quickly. As the volumes go by week, each one of them checked one of the three weeks after 20 April. They sat down at a table and started leafing through the yellowed newspapers.

"What exactly are we looking for?" Pete asked.

"News or anything associated with London," Jupe said. "Anything suspicious. Actually I have no idea."

"How precise from you, Jupe," Pete quipped.

They scanned the headlines, but nothing caught their eye. Politics, economics, news from all over the world, how could they find out what Worthington might have meant?

In the beginning, they read each other some funny or interesting news, but after a while they became more and more monosyllabic, until it was completely silent in the newspaper archives, apart from the rustling of the pages.

"I can't find anything," Pete broke the silence annoyingly.

"If it was really Worthington who sent us that disk, he could mean a date from his private life—something we'll never find in a newspaper."

"I've thought of that too," Bob muttered. "Maybe he got married or something back then. Or his father died. I don't know."

"You are right. Next, we need to take a closer look at Worthington's life. But don't give up hope, maybe we can still find something. Since we are here, we might as well check whatever we can," Jupiter said.

Silently, they absorbed themselves again in the old news.

After another ten minutes, Bob shouted: "I think I found it!"

"What?" Jupe and Pete jumped up.

"Here! A very small report from London on 23 April about a gang of drug smugglers and dealers. The police received an anonymous tip-off on the night of 20 April and subsequently arrested the gang during the handover of the money. One of the dealers was killed in a shoot-out, the others went to prison for many years."

"So?"

"One of them was named George MacDunno."

"What?" Pete grabbed the newspaper from Bob's hand and skimmed the article. "It really is George MacDunno. Then I guess his prison term is over. But what does all this have to do with Worthington?"

“But that is still a mystery to me,” Jupiter confessed.

“This article doesn’t give much away. Come on, let’s browse through the following issues, maybe we’ll find another story on this case.”

They pounced on the newspapers with renewed zeal. This time their search was much faster, because now they knew what to look for. After five minutes, Bob found another report. “Here! Again only a very short paragraph. It says that the money for the handover was not found.”

“Not found?” Pete asked. “But if the police arrested the gang during the handover of money, then the money must have been there.”

“No. The two criminal parties accused each other of theft. It was of no use to them, because they all went to prison. Nevertheless, the police have not found the money. I’m afraid that’s all it says here.”

As there were no further reports from the three weeks of newspapers, Bob requested Mrs Grayson for photocopies of the reports. Ten minutes later, when Mrs Grayson gave them the photocopies, she asked that they kindly finish up because she had to leave soon.

“We’ll be leaving shortly, Mrs Grayson,” Bob assured her. “But could you do us one more favour? You have contact with all the major newspapers in the world, haven’t you?”

She nodded. “For professional research this is absolutely necessary. What information do you need?”

Bob tapped on the two articles. “We would like to know more about this case. I can imagine that the English newspapers have reported on it in much greater detail.”

“I could email my colleagues at *The London Times* and ask them to pull the articles from their archives and fax them to me.”

Bob was beaming. “That would be awfully nice of you, Mrs Grayson.”

Flattered, she waved away. “That’s what I’m here for. That’s my job.”

“Could you perhaps ask your contact to fax the articles directly to us? It’ll be faster.”

“No problem. If you give me your number.”

Bob pulled a business card from the inside pocket of his jacket and handed it to Mrs Grayson. It said:



“The famous card of The Three Investigators,” she said with a smile. “I am honoured.”

“The phone and fax number is on the back,” Bob pointed out.

“I can send the email in a minute. However, it is probably two o’clock in the morning in London now. So you could expect an answer tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Mrs Grayson.” They put the newspaper volumes back on the shelf and said goodbye.

On the way to Wilshire Boulevard, where Worthington's apartment was, they watched very closely to see if they were being followed again. But this time there was no black BMW to be seen.

"That was a complete success," Jupe summed up. "We now know who MacDunno is. And it's obvious what he wants here."

"The money that disappeared that day," Bob said. "But what does all this have to do with Worthington?"

"You don't seriously think he was involved in this? Worthington and drug dealing? Never!" Pete cried.

"I can't imagine it either," Jupiter confessed. "But the evidence does not suggest otherwise. Worthington has pointed us to 20 April 1984. And MacDunno was looking for something in his apartment. I don't know how, but in some way Worthington was involved in the story."

"You mean Worthington knows where the money went?" Pete asked. "I refuse to believe that. He's not a criminal! No way!"

"I didn't say he is. Maybe he got into this by accident," Jupiter said. "I hope we'll get more information tomorrow."

They reached Worthington's apartment block. Bob stopped at the roadside and Jupiter got out.

"You stay in the car. It won't take long," Jupe told them. "I just want to make sure that these keys are for his apartment."

Ten minutes later, he returned smiling and satisfied. "They fit. This is the proof we needed. It was indeed Worthington who delivered the disk to Headquarters."

Bob drove on towards Rocky Beach. "Well, I'd say the case is rolling."

10. Light into Darkness

The next morning, Jupiter immediately ran to Headquarters. Hastily he opened the padlock and pushed the door open. The fax machine was empty. Disappointed, he let his shoulders droop. Now he had to be patient until the afternoon—or maybe even longer.

The school day didn't seem to end. When the First Investigator rode home after school, he leaned the bicycle against the trailer and entered Headquarters. He was rewarded for his patience—the fax machine had spit out a metre-long sheet of paper. Hastily he tore it out and delved into the London newspaper articles. There were several reports, not only the ones from April 1984 but those a year later.

When Pete and Bob showed up an hour later, Jupiter was well informed.

Pete was the first to see the roll of paper. "So it arrived! What does it say?"

"A lot," Jupe said happily. "Sit down and I'll tell you what happened on 20 April 1984."

Bob and Pete crouched down curiously and looked at the First Investigator expectantly.

"Let it out, Jupe," Bob urged. "Quick!"

"So... As we already know in this case, there were two gangs involved in drugs. The police had long been on the heels of some of the members. One day an anonymous call was received at Scotland Yard. The unknown person described exactly the place and time for a planned handover of money, where all the important leaders of the gangs would be present. The police secured the area and caught the criminals. There was a shoot-out in which one of the gangsters was killed. The others were arrested. But then it turned out that the money that should have been in the briefcase—£500,000—had disappeared.

"Instead, the briefcase was full of old newspapers. The members of the two gangs then accused each other of having stolen the money. The trial lasted a whole year and finally Scotland Yard came to the conclusion that the criminal who was killed was the one who had betrayed the others and had put the money somewhere safe. The police searched desperately, but to this day it has not been found.

"George MacDunno was then sentenced to fifteen years in prison, not only for drug trafficking, but also for a lot of other crimes—burglary, assault, armed robbery and so on. His cronies did not fare any differently—they all served a prison sentence of many years. Some of them are still there today."

"But not MacDunno," Bob remarked. "The fifteen years are up, he is a free man again—and he's probably looking for the money. I still don't see the connection to Worthington. He wasn't one of the gang, was he?"

Jupiter shook his head. "We know that he came to the US twenty years ago. Even then, he could still be involved, but I couldn't find anyone in the photos who looked like a young Worthington."

"Oh, come on!" Pete said reproachfully and reached for the articles to look at the photos. "Worthington a drug dealer? This is completely absurd."

"But there must be a connection," Jupiter insisted. "A very clear one, in fact. Worthington knew MacDunno was out looking for him. So he hid a clue here at Headquarters and then took off. What happened after that, we don't know yet."

"Maybe MacDunno saw Worthington coming through Red Gate Rover into the salvage yard," Bob pondered.

"And now he suspects we have something he needs—the CD. That also explains how he knows us at all and why he was following us yesterday."

"Hmm," Pete murmured. "The date 20 April 1984, he knows it too well, as we now know. So there is only one thing left on the CD that he might be after—the licence plate. What was it again?"

"RR2930," replied Jupiter. "You're right, Pete. This is where we should continue as long as we do not succeed in making a connection between Worthington and the events of 20 April."

"We must check the car!" Bob said enthusiastically. "There must be something hidden in there."

"But how do we get to it if Worthington's not here?" Pete asked.

"Worthington is not the only driver. His colleague Perkins also drives the Rolls for Rent-'n-Ride. And we should be calling him! Bob, hand me the phone book. No, wait, I better call the car phone. Maybe he's out in the car right now." Jupiter knew the number by heart. And indeed, within moments, Perkins answered.

"Good afternoon, this is Jupiter Jones speaking. My friends and I are long-time passengers of your colleague Worthington."

"Oh, the three detectives," Perkins said happily. "I have heard a lot about you. Isn't it incredible what happened to poor Worthington? I still can't believe it. We didn't have much to do with each other, but he was a very nice colleague."

"Yes, you're right. We are also shaken." Jupiter decided not to let Mr Perkins know what he was on to. So far they had nothing but a lot of theories. Until proven otherwise, everyone believed that Worthington was dead. So the First Investigator decided to make a white lie. "Unfortunately my friends and I left something very important in the Rolls-Royce during our last ride."

"Really? Well, the car gets cleaned regularly. I'm not aware that anything was found. What is it?" Perkins asked.

"Um... something very small," Jupiter said. "It may have slipped between the seat cushions. We'd like to search for ourselves. Could you perhaps make a short detour to Rocky Beach if you are in the vicinity on one of your next trips? That would be terribly nice of you."

"No problem. Tonight I'm gonna drive through Rocky Beach. Then you can examine the car."

"It'll be quick," said Jupiter, although he was not convinced of it. "Can you come to the Jones Salvage Yard? Or no, wait! Better to the city park near the town hall."

"I know the park. That's all right. At eight o'clock?"

"Eight o'clock is wonderful. Thanks a lot. Goodbye!" He hung up.

"What was that all about?" Pete asked without understanding. "Why don't we meet Perkins here?"

"Because we are most likely being watched, remember?" Jupiter reminded them. "We lost MacDunno yesterday, but he knows where our headquarters is. He shouldn't necessarily know that we are investigating the Rolls-Royce. So tonight we have to sneak out of the salvage yard without being seen. But that shouldn't be a problem." The First Investigator breathed a sigh of relief.

"At last, some light comes into the darkness," Bob said. "Well, it's about time. I wonder what we'll find in the car."

"If we find something," Pete replied sceptically.

Bob was leafing through the copies of the newspaper articles. Suddenly he stopped, frowned and took a closer look at one of the photos. Then he let out a gasp. "Goodness!"

"What's wrong?" Pete asked.

"This photo here! Look at that!" He held it up to the two of them. Shown were some people being led out of a courthouse in handcuffs—the drug dealers.

"The one on the right might be MacDunno," Pete thought. "I only saw him once with sunglasses, but judging by his baldness, it's possible it's him."

"It doesn't matter if it's MacDunno or not," Bob said excitedly. "Take a closer look! Don't you recognize anyone else?"

Jupiter bent over the photo once more. What could Bob have discovered that had escaped him?

"The other people!" Bob urged.

"What about them? I don't know any of them!"

Bob sighed and tapped a face in the background. "I mean this woman here. Don't you recognize her?"

"No," said Jupiter completely uncomprehendingly. "Who is she?"

"This is the same woman that's in the family photo at Worthington's apartment."

"Really? In the family photo? I didn't notice that at all," Pete confessed. "Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent. In Worthington's photo, she looked very similar to him. If I'm not mistaken, she's his sister!"

11. RR2930

“My goodness!” Pete stared at the photo. “His sister! She’s the connection! Look, she is being led out of the courtroom with the gangsters, which means she was also on trial!”

“Do not jump to conclusions,” warned Jupiter. “We can’t tell from the photo alone. She could also be a lawyer. Or a reporter.”

Pete nodded. “True. But in any case, she was involved in the case in some way. And that must be why MacDunno is here, breaking into Worthington’s house.”

“I agree with you. We need to find out how she was involved. I’ll call Cotta immediately!”

“Is that a good idea?” the Second Investigator asked doubtfully. “He was pretty grumpy last time.”

“I’ll get him around somehow,” Jupiter tried to encourage his partners and himself. Determined, he dialled Cotta’s number.

“Yeah?”

“Good afternoon, Inspector—”

“Jupiter Jones,” the inspector on the other end of the line moaned. “My colleague has already told me that you called me yesterday. I’m sorry, but I have no news of Worthington and no time to chat with you.”

“It’ll only take a minute. I need information about—”

“You need information. That’s a first,” Cotta said sarcastically. “You know something, if you join the police force, then you can get your own information in the future.”

“Just a tiny thing,” promised Jupiter. “We have here a newspaper article from *The London Times* in 1984, when Scotland Yard was prosecuting a gang of drug dealers. There is a woman in the photo in the newspaper. We’d like to know who she is and what she had to do with the case. I could fax you the article so you know exactly what it’s about.”

“Scotland Yard,” mumbled Cotta. “1984. You think it’s that easy for an inspector to get information? Obviously there’s no record of this case here. I would have to ask Scotland Yard.”

“If you would be so kind. We’ll bring you a bottle of wine next time.”

Cotta cleared his throat loudly. “Attempting to bribe police officers is a criminal act.”

“All right, no wine, then.”

“I can give the assignment to our intern, who has nothing to do all day anyway,” Cotta said quickly. “Fax me the article and wait until tomorrow. Now I have to go.”

Before Jupiter could say goodbye, Cotta had already hung up. “He just can’t refuse us anything,” claimed the First Investigator and turned on the fax machine.

“He knows that this is the quickest way to get rid of us,” Bob countered. “Don’t flatter yourself. We’re really getting on his nerves at the moment.”

“Hey, we are very close to solving the mystery,” Jupiter ignored Bob’s objections. “And it’s about time, because we still don’t know where Worthington is and whether he might be in danger. Tonight we’re going to get another piece of the puzzle.”

Bob could barely get a bite down at dinner. His parents were delighted that he finally came home, but he disappointed them with his silence and the constant glances at the clock.

"What's wrong with you?" asked his mother.

"I have to leave soon," he replied.

"I thought so. Your father has already told me you're on the trail of a mystery." She looked at him with a worried look. "It's not dangerous, is it?"

"It never is, Mum."

She laughed. "I can remember at least a dozen situations where I was very worried for you."

"No need at all. Jupiter has everything under control."

Mr Andrews laughed. "He always has."

Again Bob looked at the clock and jumped up. "I gotta go!"

"Don't come back too late," his mother said. "Remember, you have school tomorrow."

"It won't take that long today," he promised and left the kitchen. He used the back door to get to the garage. He pushed the bicycle through the garden and from there past the neighbouring houses until he arrived at the street corner. Then he looked around attentively—no black BMW, no bald man.

Bob rode a few hundred metres without lights before he turned on the lamp. It was all Jupiter's plan. Pete would do the same way. They didn't know if MacDunno was still watching them. Bob rode through a few back roads where a car could not follow him, and thus reached the centre of Rocky Beach, where they had arranged to meet Perkins in the city park.

When he arrived at the parking lot, Jupiter and Pete were already waiting for him.

"Everything go all right?" asked the First Investigator.

"Yes. I'm sure I wasn't followed."

"Good," Jupe said. "It would be a great coincidence if MacDunno showed up here. So we're safe for now."

Mr Perkins arrived at 8 pm sharp. When the Rolls-Royce with gold-plated trimmings rolled into the parking lot, The Three Investigators gave in for a moment to the absurd hope that Worthington would get out. But the man in uniform and chauffeur's cap was smaller, younger and blond. He approached them with a smile.

"So you are The Three Investigators. I don't have much time, my next passenger is waiting. So please hurry."

"No problem, Mr Perkins," Jupiter said. They climbed into the car, Jupiter to the front, Pete and Bob to the back, and began to search every square inch. Jupiter lifted the floor mats, Pete felt the cushions, Bob rummaged through the mini-bar. Then they tried to fold down the back seat, which didn't work, and finally they went for the boot.

Pete was examining the toolbox bit by bit as Mr Perkins grew impatient. "Can't you go a little faster? My boss insists on punctuality, especially when a customer takes a ride in the company's jewel. And I'm not sure if you actually lost something in the toolbox."

"Yes, yes," Pete said, "it could be."

Perkins frowned as Bob also began to inspect the first aid kit.

"What the hell exactly are you looking for?" Perkins asked.

Worthington would never say 'hell', thought Jupiter and replied: "It's a kind of game. Worthington has hidden something and we must find it."

"A game?" It was written all over Perkins's face. He didn't believe a word the three detectives said. "I'm beginning to get the impression that you're pulling my leg. And all this at poor Worthington's expense."

“No, not at all, sir! It’s important!” Jupiter said.

Perkins remained firm. “I’ll give you two more minutes, then I’m going on whether you find it by then or not.”

Hurriedly they continued their search. Jupiter even took a look into the engine, but the two minutes passed without discovering anything.

“Sorry, boys, I’ve got to go,” Perkins finally said, without the slightest regret in his voice. He slammed the back doors, got behind the wheel and started the car without another word.

“Damn it!” hissed Jupiter. “We can’t have been so wrong! There must be something in the car! What else would Worthington’s clue mean?”

The Rolls-Royce went off and the Second Investigator looked at it discontentedly. “That stupid Perkins,” he grumbled. “He could have given us more time. As the car disappeared in the distance, so is the solution to the riddle RR2930.

Suddenly, Pete winced. “Wait a minute!” he shouted. Without giving a second thought, he jumped on his bike and rode after the car that was rolling out of the parking lot. His friends shouted at him, but he didn’t pay attention. He had to catch up with the Rolls and get Perkins to stop!

Pete was delighted that he was a good sportsman and also owned a top-class bicycle. With his racing machine it was no problem for him to reach thirty miles per hour on straight, short distances. He waved, but Perkins did not see him or did not want to react. Pete accelerated even more and caught up at the driver’s window and gestured to him to pull over. The chauffeur yelled a little, put the indicator on and pulled over. He rolled down the window.

“Have you taken leave of your senses?” Perkins shouted.

“Please, sir, I know where it’s hidden,” Pete gasped.

“What are you doing?”

“Please, just wait a minute!” Pete parked his bike and hoped that Perkins would not go on. The Second Investigator opened the boot, rummaged in the toolbox and took out a screwdriver.

He began to remove the screws on the rear licence plate.

“Are you crazy?” Perkins had got out and stepped next to him. “Stop it now!”

“Just a moment,” Pete begged. Very quickly he took out the screws. Now the licence plate could be removed. Let’s hope he was right in his assumption! At the back of the plate was an envelope that was attached with thick adhesive tape. Pete tore off the envelope and took a look at it—three big question marks were written on it. Relieved he sighed.

“What’s that?” Perkins asked, astonished.

“What we have been looking for all this time,” Pete explained and hurried to screw the licence plate back on. Carefully he put back the screwdriver where it belonged, closed the boot and smiled at the completely-stunned chauffeur.

“Thank you for stopping. Have a good trip!” Before Perkins could respond, Pete grabbed his bike and went off.

Jupiter and Bob were walking restlessly up and down the parking lot when the Second Investigator came back.

“My goodness, Pete!” Bob cried. “What was it all about?”

He grinned broadly. “I have solved the puzzle!” he cried proudly. “You all didn’t think I could do it, huh?”

“Solved the puzzle?” Bob asked. “What are you talking about?”

Pete savoured this moment to the full. Normally it was Jupiter who put his friends to the torture with his findings. Now Pete could understand why he liked doing that so much—it

was a lot of fun.

"It was so obvious," he claimed. "RR2930! It wasn't a puzzle at all, it was the solution!"

"Huh?" Bob asked, puzzled.

"The licence plate! That's where the stash was!"

Jupiter folded his lower jaw down. "You have..."

"I caught up with Perkins, got him to pull over and unscrewed the licence plate."

"So?" Bob asked curiously.

Instead of an answer Pete pulled the envelope out of his pocket. "Ta-da!"

"Petel!" cried the First Investigator. "It's not often, but every now and then you manage to surprise me."

"Thank you very much," Pete said. "Perkins was pretty annoyed though. He'll tell Mr Gelbert on us."

"Never mind. Come on, open it up," Bob demanded.

"I'm on it." Pete opened the envelope and let a small object slide into his hand.

"A key," Bob said, half intrigued, half disappointed.

"Is there anything else in there?" Jupe asked.

"No," Pete replied.

"Nothing at all?" Bob asked.

"No means no!"

"What a bummer," Bob mouthed. "Another mystery."

"Let me see!" Jupiter took the key from the Second Investigator's hand. "It belongs to a safe deposit box. There's a number on here—267. Now we just have to find the right bank."

"Nothing easier than that," growled Pete. "There's only a couple hundred of those in the Los Angeles area."

"Worthington's not making it easy on us," Bob said. "I'm sure he had a good reason. Let's go to Headquarters. I'm so stressed I need to eat first."

They got on their bikes and rode back to the salvage yard at a leisurely pace. They had made some progress in the Worthington case, but not as far as they had hoped.

Jupiter unlocked the big wrought-iron gate to the salvage yard area and they pushed their bicycles to the trailer.

"I'm afraid the refrigerator at Headquarters is empty. I'm gonna go over and see if Aunt Mathilda has anything yummy for us." Jupiter strolled over to the house, but after a few steps, a sharp yell made him collapse.

"Jupe! Jupe, come here quickly!" It was Bob.

Jupiter ran back. "What's wrong?"

Accusingly, Pete and Bob pointed to the place where a thick padlock normally secured the door to Headquarters.

The lock was gone.

12. A Surprising Phone Call

“No!” cried Jupiter, ripped open the door and turned on the light, expecting to see a completely devastated office. But to his astonishment everything looked unchanged.

“Don’t touch anything!” cried Pete. “Otherwise we might smudge fingerprints.”

“Fingerprints?” Bob sneered. “We don’t need them. It’s obvious who did this!”

“And it is also clear what he wanted,” Jupiter agreed.

Bob nodded grimly. “The disk.” He walked up to the desk, opened the diskette box and flipped through it. Then he looked in the drive. It was empty. “He’s got it.”

“He doesn’t have it,” Jupe said. “Because I had a really stupid feeling about it and I put the disk in a safe place. It’s in my bedroom.”

Pete raised his eyebrows. “Jupe! I must return the compliment. Even you never cease to surprise me. But I just remembered that the disk wouldn’t have done him any good anyway. After all, we’ve already solved the puzzle and—”

He was interrupted by the ringing of the phone.

Jupiter frowned. “Who can that be now?” He turned on the loudspeaker and picked up the phone. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Jupiter! I can’t talk long. Listen—you must be careful!”

“Worthington!” cried Jupiter, Pete and Bob at the same time.

“Yes, it’s me.”

“What on earth happened?”

“Not on the phone. We should get together. The situation has got out of control.”

“All right. When and where?” Jupiter asked.

“Tomorrow night. In the big arcade at Hollywood Square.”

“At the arcade?” Jupiter thought he heard wrongly.

“Yes. At 9 pm. Now listen carefully. You are being watched.”

“We’ve already noticed.”

“All the better. You have to make sure no one follows you tomorrow. Under no circumstances should anyone see you go to Hollywood Square. Do you hear, Jupiter? It’s important!”

“Yes, Worthington!” Jupiter said.

“I trust you. See you tomorrow!” Before Jupiter could reply anything else, Worthington hung up.

Slowly the First Investigator turned to Bob and Pete. “It was Worthington.”

“We heard that! He’s alive!” Pete cheered. “Thank goodness!”

“So he wasn’t kidnapped. But still he’s in big trouble,” Bob said. “He whispered the whole time. I’ve never seen him so nervous. It was not his usual composure.”

“We will help him,” Pete said, convinced. “That’s what he wants, isn’t it? He’ll tell us what’s going on tomorrow and together we’ll get it under control. Come on, guys, this calls for a celebration! I’ll buy you an ice cream! The ice cream parlour in town is open for another hour.”

In the best of moods, Pete stepped outside.

“And what about MacDunno?” Bob said. “Worthington has warned us! He’s probably still watching us!”

“So what? Let him!” Pete quipped. “He can’t do anything but watch us eat ice cream.”

“Hopefully everything will clear up when we meet Worthington tomorrow,” Bob said as he spooned his wild berry ice cream. “Should we actually do something about this key thing?”

Jupiter nodded. “I’m for it. The best thing is to be as prepared as possible. So it would be appropriate to find the locker tomorrow afternoon before we meet him.”

“And which of the hundred banks do we choose?”

“Well, we could go back to Worthington’s apartment and look for his records,” Jupiter said. “That might take some time after MacDunno has rummaged through his things. Besides that, now that we know Worthington is not dead, we can almost certainly assume that he took the important papers with him. Also, it would be too risky with MacDunno following us.”

As if on command, Bob and Pete looked over their shoulders for once to make sure. But they were the only guests, neither a bald man nor anyone else was near them.

“Therefore, I plead for good luck,” Jupe said.

“Since when do you leave something to luck?” Pete asked in surprise.

“Well, there’s a certain amount of logic in that,” Jupe said. “Where do you have your bank account?”

“Huh? What kind of question is that?”

“Just answer it, Pete,” Jupe said.

“Well, at the Eastwood Bank here in Rocky Beach. Where else?”

“Me too,” Bob said.

“And why?”

Bob guessed what the First Investigator was getting at. “Because it’s the nearest to us. So you’re saying, first of all, we should just go to the bank nearest to Worthington’s apartment?”

“Right. Most people think in very practical terms,” Jupiter explained. “You choose the bank that is easiest to reach. Just as they usually go shopping in the supermarket around the corner, even if it is a few cents more expensive than the one on the outskirts of town.

“In this case, it is not just any bank. We’ll have to find a bank that has safe deposit boxes. That would narrow down our options. With any luck, we’ll find the right locker that way, else we’ll have to go check out Worthington’s apartment for records.”

Bob cleared his throat. “And what do you think is waiting for us in that locker?”

Jupiter smiled. “The missing money!”

“You can’t be serious!” cried Pete in outrage. “You really think Worthington has the money? He’s no criminal!”

“It was a joke,” Jupiter said. “I don’t know what we’ll find. But hopefully some answers and not another mystery.”

“And how do we get to Los Angeles tomorrow without being seen? It won’t work in the dark this time as the bank would be closed,” Bob noted.

“It’s easy—by bus,” Jupiter replied. “Because then we can watch very closely whether a little Scot without hair is riding along or not.”

“He might follow behind the bus in his car,” Pete threw in.

“True,” Jupiter agreed. “But not undetected, if we sit in the back row and pay attention.”

“What if we see the black BMW?” Pete asked.

“Then we’ll think of something,” said Jupiter himself. “After all, what are we detectives for?”

The Three Investigators did not need a flash of inspiration when they left for Los Angeles the next afternoon. No one had got in with them and no car was following the bus. At each bus stop, they suspiciously eyed the passengers boarding, but MacDunno was not among them.

They had earlier found out that the nearest bank that has safe deposit boxes was located two blocks away. Very calmly, they got off at Wilshire Boulevard and walked the last bit to the shops.

“All right, let’s try here,” said Jupiter and entered the bank building.

It took them a while to find their way around the large entrance hall. Finally, Bob discovered a sign that showed the way to the safe deposit vault. They followed a staircase down to the basement where a uniformed clerk was sitting at a large desk. Immediately he pulled his eyebrows together suspiciously when he saw the three detectives. Pete felt uncomfortable, but Jupiter, who was bursting with self-confidence, calmly searched for the locker with the number 267, but when he tried to put the key in the keyhole, he flinched. Each locker had two locks.

“May I know what you are doing here?” asked the clerk at the desk unkindly.

“I just want to... open my locker,” replied the First Investigator reluctantly.

“I’ll need your particulars.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your ID,” growled the clerk angrily. “I need to verify that this is indeed your safe deposit box.”

“But I have the key,” said Jupiter and held it up as proof.

The man laughed. “That’s not enough. Anyone could come and open the lockers. Didn’t you bring your ID?”

“Yes, I do,” Jupiter replied.

“What’s the number of the safe deposit box?” The clerk drummed his fingers on the tabletop.

“267,” Jupiter said.

Immediately the man opened a small filing cabinet and searched for the relevant file.

“But... but it’s not mine,” Jupiter said quickly. “We’re just supposed to get something out for a friend. He’s sick and sent us here.”

“Then he will have given one of you a power of attorney to access his safe deposit box,” muttered the clerk as he leafed through the papers. “May I see your IDs now, please?”

“Power of attorney?” echo Pete.

“Yes,” the man said. “The locker cannot be opened without a power of attorney.”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “I’m not sure that...”

“The IDs, please!” the man insisted.

Reluctantly, the three detectives put their IDs on the desk.

“Here we are,” growled the clerk. “A power of attorney for Jupiter Jones.” He took a critical look at the First Investigator’s ID and nodded contentedly. Then he let the file disappear into his desk drawer, got up and went to the locker.

There were lockers of different sizes. For people who kept their jewellery in the lockers, one in shoebox format was enough. 267 was, however, among the king-size editions. Demanding, the clerk stretched out his hand.

“Your key, please!”

Jupiter handed it to him and the employee opened both locks—one with Worthington’s, the other with his own key. The door swung open. In that compartment was a large metal

briefcase with a combination lock. Jupiter took it out. "Do I need to sign something?"

"No, that was it," replied the clerk and handed Worthington's key back to him.

Jupiter hurriedly left the vault with Pete and Bob in tow.

"Phew!" Pete moaned as they walked through the hall outside. "Now I was really queasy. ID check! Who would think of such a thing!"

"Worthington," Bob replied. "Otherwise he wouldn't have ensured that Jupiter was authorized to open the locker. And is the case heavy?"

"Sort of," Jupe said.

"Well, open up," the Second Investigator demanded.

"Are you crazy? Not here! We're going outside!" But when they stepped onto the street teeming with people and cars, Jupiter realized that this was not a good idea. "There are too many people here. Let's go somewhere else."

"And go where?" Pete asked. "People are everywhere!"

Jupiter looked around helplessly. "Let's go to the park over there! Quick!"

The park was nothing more than a sparse collection of palm trees with a bench between them. But this area at least gave the impression of seclusion. The Three Investigators sat down, Jupiter in the middle, the case on his lap. Checking, he looked around once more. There were people everywhere, but nobody paid attention to them.

"All right. It's a 3-digit combination lock," Jupe said. "Worthington has not given us any indication of the numbers, so my best guess would be..."

"... The same as the number of his safe deposit box!" Bob interrupted.

"Yes, of course!" Jupe said and then he adjusted the dials to the number 267. Then he pushed both the lock levers on either side of the briefcase and it clicked audibly.

But Jupe hesitated.

"What is it now? Come on!" urged Bob.

"Wait! What do we do if there's a bomb in there?" Pete asked uncertainly.

"Don't talk rubbish, why would Worthington have a bomb in his locker?" Bob cried. "Open it!"

"All right." Jupiter took a deep breath and opened the briefcase. The three of the only needed one quick look, and Jupiter quickly closed it again.

"The missing money!" gasped Pete. "It's actually in here!"

13. Family Secrets

Jupiter hesitated a while and then opened the briefcase again—it was filled to the top with carefully bundled £50 banknotes issued by the Bank of England.

“My goodness! Are they real?” Bob asked in amazement as he pulled out one of the notes. He quickly made sure that nobody was watching them, then he looked at it more closely.

The banknote had a watermark, felt like how money should feel, and looked very real. “The date on this note is 1981. So this must really be the money from the drug deal. What do we do now?” Bob asked.

“If this is really half a million pounds, I don’t want to sit here on a bench in the middle of Los Angeles any longer than necessary,” Jupiter decided. “This place is full of crazy people.”

“And where do we go? You don’t want to take it with you to Rocky Beach?” Pete asked horrified and saw himself lying in bed sleepless from fear for the next three weeks.

“No! I’ll put the briefcase back in the locker,” Jupiter said. “It was safe there for years, and I want it to stay that way until we know what this is all about.”

Just as Jupiter was about to close the briefcase, Bob reached in once more and took out a bundle of money. “Just in case,” he said. “Maybe we need proof.” He carefully stowed the notes in the inside pocket of his jacket.

Jupiter nodded. Then The Three Investigators hurried back to the bank. It was only a few steps, but they suddenly felt observed. All the people on the street seemed to stare at them as if the dollar or pound signs were in their eyes.

A beggar sitting on the pavement stretched out his hand demandingly and Jupiter felt as if he wanted to reach for the briefcase. Startled, the First Investigator jumped a little to one side. He was glad when they entered the bank building.

The bank clerk in the basement rolled his eyes when he saw the three detectives again, but they didn’t care. As quickly as possible Jupiter let the briefcase disappear into the locker and sank the key deep into his trousers pocket.

“Now what?” Pete asked.

“Now we go back and hope that Cotta has some information for us by now,” Jupe said.

They were lucky. When they entered Headquarters, for which Jupiter had bought a new lock on the way back, the answering machine did not flash, but a short time later, the telephone rang.

“Cotta here. Finally, someone answers. I hate talking to a machine.” The inspector’s voice sounded extremely grumpy.

“Good day, Inspector!” Jupiter whispered as friendly as possible. “How are you?”

“Save it, Jupiter. I’ll be leaving for my well-earned weekend, but before I do I have some information for you. Scotland Yard has contacted me.”

“Really? Shoot!”

“The woman you saw in the photo was with the gang of drug dealers—at least that’s what they thought at first. Later it turned out that she was the partner of one gang member but she had nothing to do with the money handover or the drug deal. She was therefore released a

few days after an investigation. And here's where it gets interesting—the woman's name is Susanna Worthington."

Jupiter swallowed.

"This is not a coincidence, is it? Jupiter, are you there?" Cotta said. "I would be very grateful if you would slowly tell me what's going on here and what secrets you've been uncovering."

"We suspect that she is Worthington's sister," replied the First Investigator reluctantly.

"And Worthington's disappearance is directly related to this story from back then, am I right?" Cotta asked. "By the way, his body still hasn't turned up, but I wouldn't be surprised if there wasn't one by now. All right, let me have the rest of the story."

"Well, we don't know very much yet either," Jupiter pressed around.

"But I suppose you know that there were half a million pounds at stake then, don't you?" Cotta said. "The money was never found."

"Yes, I do."

"Then you should also know that it can be dangerous when so much money is involved."

Jupiter was silent.

"All right. Once again you don't have enough in your hand to tell me," growled Cotta.

"I have one more question!" cried Jupiter before Cotta could hang up. "What was Susanna's partner's name?"

"Hold on, let me check my records." Paper rustled. "There! His name is George MacDunno. He was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. I guess they're not together anymore."

"Thank you, sir, that's what I wanted to hear."

"Indeed. Well, have fun with that information." Cotta hung up before Jupiter could thank him.

"He's pretty annoyed," Pete remarked. "Maybe we should have told him what we know."

"Not until we know what Worthington's got to do with this," Jupe remarked.

"Jupe!" Aunt Mathilda's voice echoed across the salvage yard. "Work for you!"

The First Investigator rolled his eyes. "It was bound to happen sooner or later."

"At least your aunt left us alone for a week," Bob said. "This was indeed rare."

The three detectives had committed themselves to help at the salvage yard. In return, they were allowed to continue using the old trailer as their headquarters. While Uncle Titus usually left the three of them alone, Aunt Mathilda put them to work several times a week. Listlessly they shuffled outside, where Mathilda Jones was already waiting impatiently for them.

"You must help Uncle Titus unload. He'll be back with a new load at any moment," she said. "I have work in the office. Don't bother me!"

"All right, Aunt Mathilda," Jupiter said.

While waiting for Uncle Titus in the warm morning sun, they discussed the information they had just received from Inspector Cotta.

"So Worthington's sister was MacDunno's partner—unbelievable," Pete thought. "I never would have expected that."

Bob frowned in amusement. "Why? You don't even know her."

"No, but we know her brother," Pete replied. "And he would never get involved with a gang like that."

"But apparently he did," contradicted Jupiter. "Or how else do you explain the money in his safe deposit box?"

"Susanna must have stolen it," Bob beat the Second Investigator to it. "The police suspected that the killed gangster had hidden the money, but now we know that it was not true. Susanna had the money."

"Or at least she knew where it was. In any case, she passed it on to her brother."

"And he kept it in his locker for fifteen years?" Pete doubted it. "That doesn't make any sense."

"We have to ask him tonight," Jupiter said. "I'm sure he can tell us the whole story."

"Have you ever wondered what we would do if Worthington is actually guilty?" Bob asked.

"Guilty? Of what?" Pete asked.

"Well, whatever. If he was really involved with the drug dealers. If he committed a crime. What are we supposed to do then? Report him?"

"Report Worthington?" Pete tapped his finger on his forehead. "You're out of your mind."

"But if he's a criminal, we have to do it," Bob objected.

"But he's not," Pete quipped.

"And you know that for a fact?" Bob asked.

"Yes!" Pete replied.

"And why does he have half a million pounds in his safe deposit box?" Bob said.

"He... I don't know," cried Pete angrily. "I don't know what Worthington did or didn't do. I haven't the slightest idea what kind of person he is or used to be. But I know he's our friend, and that's why we won't betray him."

"Even if he killed someone?" Bob asked.

"Stop making up stupid things, Bob," Pete replied angrily.

"I'm just trying to figure out what our limits are," Bob said. "Worthington's our friend, you're right. But what do we do if he really is guilty? And how much does it take for us to do something?" Questioningly he looked at Pete and Jupiter in turn. No one knew the answer.

At that moment, Uncle Titus's truck rolled into the salvage yard. It was fully loaded to the top with junk, which was tied down with dozens of belts and ropes. That would make The Three Investigators busy for a while.

While they were unloading all the stuff, Uncle Titus took his nephew aside. "Have you spoken to Worthington yet?" he whispered.

"Excuse me?"

"Worthington! Did you talk to him about your aunt's birthday? Don't tell me you've forgotten again."

"No, no," replied Jupiter quickly. "I... have spoken to him. Just yesterday."

"So, how's it going?"

"Uh... yes."

"Wonderful." Uncle Titus tapped him on the shoulder with a smile. "Thank you!" In a good mood, he trudged away.

Jupiter shook his head in confusion. What had he just done there? He had made a promise he might not be able to keep.

"All the more reason to solve the case as quickly as possible," he murmured.

14. A Chance Discovery

After work at the salvage yard, Bob and Pete went home. They did not meet again until the evening to set off together for the arcade on Hollywood Square. It was half past eight when Pete and Bob went to the Jones house. Jupiter opened the door for them and they went upstairs to his room and turned on the television.

“So,” said Jupiter. “Through this window, the flickering of the TV is clearly visible from the street. Everyone will think that we’re gathered here to watch the Friday night crime thriller together. Besides, I’ve thought of something more.” Proudly he pointed to a fan that was standing in the corner.

“Fresh air. Great,” Pete said sarcastically. “That’s it?”

The First Investigator did not let himself be put off. “I hooked it up to a timer. Every ten minutes this thing turns on for one minute.”

Pete did not understand, but Bob guessed what Jupiter had in mind. “The fan is pointed at the curtains. When the fan blows, the curtains move, and from outside through the window, it looks like there is someone in the room.”

“Exactly. Bob, I always knew you understood me.”

“Not bad, Jupe,” Bob praised. “This makes the illusion perfect. Whoever is watching us will think we are in the room.”

“Fine,” Pete said. “But how do we get out unseen?”

“Through the living room window downstairs—because you can’t see that from the street,” Jupe said. “Then we sneak across the dark courtyard, climb over the fence and disappear. It’s not far to the arcade. We can walk there.”

Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda looked up in surprise when The Three Investigators entered the living room. “Good evening, you three. You guys wanna watch the mystery show with us? I always thought boys your age had better things to do at night.”

“No, no, Aunt Mathilda. We’re just passing through.” Jupiter went to the window, opened it and clumsily climbed out. Then it was Bob’s turn. He concentrated only on climbing out and tried to suppress the embarrassment of the situation.

The last one was Pete. Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda stared at him as if he came from another star. Smiling apologetically, he briefly raised his hand. “Have a nice evening!” The next moment he hit his head against the window frame. “Ouch! Goodbye.”

Jupiter looked in again. “See you both later.”

“Tell me, Jupe,” his aunt began in earnest. “Aren’t you a little old for this kind of childishness?”

The arcade was full and loud. The Three Investigators met some friends from school, who were enthusiastic about hot car races and shooting down enemy spaceships. Some stood at the pool table and felt incredibly cool when they were lining up the cues.

But the three detectives were not in the mood for games. Searching, they looked around and wandered up and down the computer game machines, but Worthington was nowhere to be found. It was 9 pm sharp.

They each ordered a Coke, sat down at a table and waited.

At half past nine, Bob became slowly restless. "Something's not right. Worthington is always punctual. Even if he's in trouble right now, he would never keep us waiting."

"Maybe something went wrong and he missed the bus," Pete thought. "At least he doesn't have a car anymore."

"Or..." Jupiter hesitated to say what everyone thought. "Or MacDunno got him."

"Shouldn't we tell Cotta?" Pete asked uncertainly.

"And what do we tell him? We've got nothing," Jupiter said.

"I wouldn't call a briefcase full of money nothing," Pete quipped.

"But this case only incriminates Worthington, not MacDunno," Jupiter insisted. "So far this Scot has done nothing but two break-ins where nothing was stolen. I don't think it's even called break-ins—it's just trespassing. In addition, there is also damage to property in the form of a destroyed padlock. Not enough to put out for a police manhunt."

"And Worthington's disappearance?" Pete interjected.

"Does the police think it was an accident. We can only convince them of the opposite if we tell them the whole story, including half a million pounds waiting in the safe deposit box," Jupiter said. "And that brings us back to square one."

"Maybe he'll show up," Bob hoped.

But Worthington never showed up. Not at 10 pm, not at 10:30 pm and not at 11 pm. The Three Investigators stared silently into their glasses, which had been empty for ages, and hung on to gloomy thoughts. At half past eleven Pete finally said: "I guess he won't come. I have to go home or my mother will freak out."

Jupiter agreed. "You're probably right. Let's get out of here."

They left the arcade and slowly made their way home.

"What shall we do now?" Bob asked.

"I don't know. Maybe I'll think of something tonight," Jupiter said. "Meet me at Headquarters tomorrow afternoon."

"And until then, do you have a plan?" Pete became more optimistic.

"I can't guarantee that."

They said goodbye at a road junction.

Back at the salvage yard, Jupiter went to Headquarters in the quiet hope that Worthington might have called and left a message, but he was disappointed. Dejected, he took the normal route to his house this time. If MacDunno was indeed the reason why Worthington hadn't appeared, then he certainly wasn't watching them anymore.

That night Jupiter fell into a restless sleep very late.

The next day, the First Investigator went to Headquarters right after breakfast. Here he could think best. He had to think of something urgently! Maybe Pete was right and they should inform Cotta. They would still need his help anyway.

The only plan Jupiter had was to track down Worthington's sister to find out from her what the whole story was about. He wondered if she still lived in England. The inspector might have been able to find out. However, it would be hard work to persuade him to help The Three Investigators again. Besides, Cotta was off for the weekend so the earliest they could reach him would be in two days' time. They probably could not wait that long.

Jupiter made a decision. He went out to the salvage yard. Uncle Titus's pick-up truck was there and found out that nobody was using it. He looked at his watch. Bob and Pete wouldn't show up for two hours. If he hurried, he'd be back by then. Determined, he borrowed the truck and drove to Wilshire Boulevard.

When his friends came to the salvage yard, Jupiter was just back.

"Hi," said the Second Investigator tonelessly. "Did you sleep well last night?"

"Hmm."

"And do you have a plan?" Pete asked.

"No, unfortunately. But information."

They sat down and looked at the First Investigator questioningly.

"What information?" Bob asked.

"About Susanna," Jupe said. "She's anything but a cold-hearted gangster accomplice."

"How do you know that?"

"I just went to Worthington's apartment."

"Excuse me?" Pete asked, startled. "But MacDunno—"

"Didn't come after me, don't worry," Jupiter said. "I was paying attention. Worthington's disappeared and the only hot lead we have is his sister. So I searched his apartment for documents that might shed some light on the matter."

"So?"

"I found letters from Susanna from when MacDunno was at large—only two or three, I'm afraid. But they show that she was in a lot of trouble then."

"No wonder," Bob said. "After all, she got involved with MacDunno."

"And that's exactly what she regretted," continued Jupiter. "She was very desperate and kept mentioning that she had to break out of this hell, but was afraid—afraid of MacDunno. He seems to have treated her pretty badly."

"So she was more the victim than the perpetrator," Pete thought.

"Therefore, she was the only one acquitted when the gang was convicted." Jupiter nodded. "Her last letter was very short. In it she wrote that she now finally knows what to do to part with MacDunno. She reminds Worthington of a promise he made her."

"What promise?"

"This was not evident from the letter. Unfortunately, that was all I could find out."

"Hmm." Bob scratched his head. "And what do we do with this knowledge?"

"Nothing at all, I'm afraid," confessed Jupiter. "The letters didn't even have a return address that we could trace."

"We must inform Cotta," Bob said. "If he finds Susanna, she can tell us what happened at that time."

"I had the same idea. First thing Monday I'm going to call the inspector. In the meantime, we can only hope that nothing happens to Worthington."

Suddenly, the phone rang.

"Maybe that's him!" exclaimed Pete excitedly and switched on the loudspeaker. "Come on, Jupe, pick it up!"

The First Investigator picked up the phone. "The Three Investigators—"

"Jupiter Jones?"

"Yes."

"I've had it with you three guys. I've finally had enough!"

"Mr Gelbert!" said Jupiter, irritated when he recognised the voice of the boss of Rent-'n-Ride. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? You know damn well!"

Jupiter guessed that Perkins must have told his boss what had happened the night before last. Probably he had exaggerated excessively and told Mr Gelbert a few shivering stories about how they had taken the Rolls-Royce apart.

"No," he lied. "What should I know?"

"First you call Perkins in and take apart the Rolls-Royce, and now this!"

The First Investigator frowned. "Now what?"

"Don't act so hypocritical, Jupiter Jones!" Mr Gelbert shouted. "You think you can do anything you want since Worthington left, huh?"

"I don't see the connection. What are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? What am I talking about?" Gelbert yelled so loud that Jupiter held the receiver away a bit. "You came onto the premises last night and broke into the Rolls-Royce! This is what I'm talking about!"

"Excuse me?"

"Do not deny it! The lock was picked, the glove box was ransacked and both licence plates were unscrewed!"

"I swear to you, Mr Gelbert, we had nothing to do with it!"

"Oh no? Then I suppose you're gonna tell me you didn't bother poor Perkins."

"That I'll admit we did," Jupiter replied. "But we would never dream of damaging the Rolls-Royce!"

"I don't believe a word you say! From the beginning I was against you using Worthington's services whenever it suited you."

"You've done a good job, if I may remind you," replied Jupiter angrily. "And I really don't know what..."

"I already had a bad feeling when you, of all people, won the competition back then! Detectives! That was really the last thing I needed in my customer file! But this is over now, once and for all! You'll never get the Rolls-Royce again! And no other car either! Is that clear?"

"But I'm telling you—"

"Be glad I'm not calling the police! Don't you ever call here again, Jupiter Jones! Do you get me? Never again!" The last words almost drowned in the roar. Then the connection was terminated.

"What's he doing?" Pete shouted furiously. "He's out of his mind!"

"He's completely nuts," Bob agreed.

Jupiter punched furiously on the table, wiping a pencil to the floor. "That's it! Accusing us of breaking into his stupid car. Let him see where he is with his company." Furiously, he bent down to pick up the pencil.

"But we are also really haunted by bad luck," Bob said. "First, Worthington doesn't show up and now this phone call. Jupe? What are you doing under the table?"

"I... I can't find the pencil," stuttered the First Investigator.

"It's right under your nose!" Bob exclaimed.

"Oh, here." He picked the pencil up, came up again very slowly and looked at his friends, irritated. "I need fresh air, or my collar will burst," he said and then stood up.

"Are you coming?" Without waiting for a reaction, he opened the door and stepped outside.

Pete and Bob looked at each other in wonder, shrugged their shoulders and followed him. Jupiter waited for them and then hurriedly closed the trailer door behind them.

"Jupe? You look so funny," Pete remarked. "Something wrong?"

"Follow me..." he whispered and went a few metres further into the workshop.

"What's... what's wrong with you? Bob wanted to know.

"You won't believe it! When I bent over for the pencil, I discovered something under the desk!"

“A lot of dust probably,” Pete said. “I haven’t finish cleaning the carpets after the disruption the other day.”

Jupiter shook his head. “No, it’s something else entirely. There’s a bug under our desk!”

15. The Game Continues

“Excuse me?” Bob asked.

“By bug, I hope you mean the insect,” said Pete, “Although that would be pretty disgusting.”

“No, by bugging I mean a listening device!” whispered Jupiter and stepped back a few metres again.

“Are you sure?” Pete asked.

“Yes! I know what a bug looks like!” Jupiter cried.

“And who put it there?”

“Don’t ask such stupid questions, Pete!” Bob said. “For sure it was MacDunno!”

“Yes, and he planted the bug when he broke into Headquarters the other night!” Jupiter exclaimed. “My goodness, now I also know why we haven’t seen a black BMW in the last two days! He no longer had to shadow us to know where we were and what we were up to.”

“Great! And we behave like idiots, climbing over fences, sneaking through gardens, and taking the bus just so we are not followed. That’s incredible.”

Jupiter wandered restlessly up and down, pinching his lower lip. “It all makes sense,” he murmured. “It all makes sense.”

“Would you kindly share your findings,” Bob asked.

Jupiter began: “MacDunno wants the money, and he knew Worthington had it stashed somewhere. The other night, MacDunno looked in Worthington’s apartment, but he didn’t find anything, because Worthington was smart enough to hide the safe deposit box key and only give us a tip. For some reason I don’t know yet, MacDunno knew we were involved in the case.

“Then he broke into Headquarters and looked for a clue, but found nothing since I had put the disk in my bedroom. So he installed a bug to track our conversations from that time onwards.

“Worthington didn’t show up yesterday because MacDunno overheard his short phone call to us and knew where we were going to meet. We were at the arcade at 9 pm sharp. Worthington must have gone there earlier and MacDunno intercepted him!

“When he got hold of Worthington, he probably forced him to tell. MacDunno then knew of the safe deposit box and where the key was hidden. So he was the one who took apart the Rolls-Royce last night. He wanted the key but did not find it because we got there first. And Mr Gelbert thinks it was us that damaged the car.”

“But...” Bob hesitantly began. “But that is illogical! If MacDunno has been eavesdropping on us for two days, he would have known that we have the key. Then why was he looking in the Rolls-Royce?”

“He doesn’t know!” Jupiter exclaimed. “Remember? We talked twice about the key and the briefcase—once the day before yesterday in the ice cream parlour and once yesterday when we waited out here for Uncle Titus. But there was not a single word said about it at Headquarters. MacDunno could not have known that we had found the key and the money.”

Bob and Pete recalled the conversations of the last days.

"You're right, Jupe. He had no idea that we have the key," Bob said. But then his face darkened. "But by now at the latest, he'll know who has it. If he's not completely stupid, he'll put two and two together and figure out that the key is with us."

"There's one more thing," Jupiter said. "If he finally gets the key, he should also know that he cannot get access to the safe deposit box without a power of attorney. Also, the bank wouldn't know that Worthington was supposedly dead. So, the only way out for MacDunno would be to bring Worthington along to the bank to get the briefcase."

"Or you..." Bob said. "Since you have the power of attorney!"

"You're right!" Jupiter remarked. "But he doesn't know that. In any case, he'll want the key first!"

Pete swallowed. "That means... he'll be here very soon. If he's not afraid to take Worthington prisoner, he has no scruples with us. Maybe he's waiting somewhere by the road for one of us to leave the salvage yard."

But Jupiter shook his head. "I don't think so. Nobody pushes him. He can wait in peace and quiet until a favourable opportunity presents itself. Where and when that will be, he'll find out as he eavesdrops on us with his bug. And this is our chance!" He struck his fist into the flat of his hand.

"What do you mean?" Pete asked.

"We'll beat him in his own game!" Jupiter said excitedly. "After all, he doesn't know we found the bug. So we offer him the opportunity he is waiting for and present him with the key on a silver platter. No, better yet, the briefcase with the money in it."

"And how are you gonna do that?" Pete asked again.

The First Investigator was smiling. "My brain is running on high speed! I'll have a brilliant plan in five minutes, I promise!"

When The Three Investigators went back into Headquarters, Jupiter sighed loudly. "I feel a little better now. That stupid Mr Gelbert!"

"At least now we know that MacDunno is the real culprit," Pete remarked. "So? What does that get us? We can hardly sell this story to Gelbert."

"Oh, forget about that Gelbert," Bob intervened. "More importantly, MacDunno now knows we have the key. At least, that's what he suspects. That means he's gonna show up here very soon looking for it."

"He can have the key now," said Jupiter. "But he'll be shocked to find that the locker is now empty."

"So much the worse," Bob said. "I told you right away that it wasn't a good idea to take the briefcase with all that money in it. Half a million pounds! And what are we gonna do? Keep it here?"

"We're not just going to keep it here," contradicted Jupiter, "We'll hide it well."

"Hide it?" Pete said. "We can't really hide anything well in this trailer."

"No, definitely not in this trailer, and not in the house," Jupiter said. "In fact, I've got a great place for it. You know the wooden chest under the table in the workshop?"

"You mean the one you put the tools?" Pete asked.

"Yup, I'll hide the briefcase under the tools," Jupiter said.

"In that wooden chest at our workshop?" Pete asked, astonished. "What sort of hiding place is that?"

"The best hiding place is where it is not obvious," Jupe said confidently. "Nobody would look there. No one is interested in a small, shabby, brown briefcase in an old wooden chest. If

MacDunno shows up here again, he'll be looking for the key here in the trailer, nowhere else."

"What if he doesn't find anything?" Pete asked. "Then maybe he'll get the idea to look around the workshop after all."

"This is exactly where my plan comes into effect," Jupiter explained.

"You have a plan?" Pete said. "Why didn't you say so?"

"Look, the trick is this," Jupiter said. "He'll find something—the key. We'll put it somewhere in here. Of course not too flashy, otherwise he'll smell the roast. So, he's gonna break in here and take the key. However, he should know that he cannot get access to the locker with just a key."

"Come to think of it, you're right, Jupe," Bob said. "You have access because Worthington gave you the power of attorney!"

"So how is he gonna get to the locker then?" Pete asked.

"One obvious way is to go with Worthington!" Jupe said.

"You're right again!" Pete exclaimed.

"The earliest is first thing Monday morning," Jupiter continued. "But instead of the briefcase he will find the police there, who we have alerted to catch him. Very simple."

"This is a fantastic plan!" cried Pete enthusiastically. At the same time he tapped his finger on his forehead.

"Once the police have arrested him, Worthington can come out of hiding," Jupiter continued, sticking his tongue out at Pete.

"I don't know," Bob muttered as anxiously as possible. "I'm still anxious about the money. Is there anywhere safer to hide it? Or should we go straight to the police?"

"There's no need to do so. MacDunno doesn't know we have it," Jupiter said. "He's just looking for the key. Not to worry. Like I said earlier, the best hiding place is where it is not obvious, so with the briefcase in the wooden chest, no one will have the slightest idea that there are half a million pounds in it. Trust me."

"All right," Pete said. "Then we can look forward to the case being solved the day after tomorrow. And what now?"

"Now, unfortunately, we must help Uncle Titus sort some stuff or something like that. I don't know," Jupiter said.

They left Headquarters with a happy grin. When they were far enough away from the trailer, Pete rubbed his hands. "That was brilliant! He'll fall for that, I guarantee it!"

"Great, Jupe!" praised Bob. "When do you think he'll strike?"

"Tonight. One hundred percent," Jupiter remarked. "And in the meantime, we still have a lot to do if everything is to work out. Let's go into my house to continue planning."

16. Operation Worthington

They went to the kitchen and sat down. Aunt Mathilda was at the salvage yard office and Uncle Titus was out searching for junk, so they could discuss undisturbed and more importantly, without MacDunno eavesdropping.

Jupiter had earlier found a similar briefcase in the salvage yard. “Most importantly, we have to decide how to fix up this briefcase,” he started.

To do that, one idea was to cut paper and bundle them in between the genuine notes that Bob took from Worthington’s briefcase. Then they would leave the briefcase unlocked for MacDunno to check. But this would be too risky as MacDunno would easily notice the paper if he took out a bundle and flipped it.

Therefore, they decided not to allow MacDunno time to open the briefcase to check the contents. When he discovered a combination lock, he would either have to bring it back to Worthington for the combination or somehow break it open. They suspect it would be the former. He would not just run off with the money because he still had to go and get rid of Worthington.

Jupiter changed the combination lock to the same as Worthington’s—267. Part of their plan was to equip the briefcase with a mini transmitter. Jupiter had assembled several of such devices some time ago. This newer set of devices was better as they had a greater range to allow them to follow someone by car. Although they had not used it for a long time, they have tested the devices. Jupiter slit open the fabric lining of the briefcase, pushed the transmitter in and carefully sewed the whole thing back together.

In the meantime, Bob took out the bundle of £50 notes, weighed it, and calculated the weight of £500,000 worth of the notes. He got some paper and piled them up to the same weight. Then he stuffed the paper into the briefcase.

To play safe, they decided to create a fake key and leave it at Headquarters in case MacDunno decided to break-in there. Pete got hold of a key similar to Worthington’s. He then proceeded to put in a key chain and labelled it with the numbers.

“Let’s move it along, fellas,” Jupiter urged. “We still have one more thing to do at the salvage yard and then get our gear together.”

Back at the salvage yard, the three got hold of a spotlight with a stand. They cabled it up and placed it in a position to simulate a motion sensing light. Then they ran extension cables near to Red Gate Rover and fixed a switch there that will turn on the spotlight.

Finally, they piled up some junk around Red Gate Rover for Jupiter to hide and observe MacDunno’s search at the workshop.

“So, fellas, I’m gonna go out and get my MG now,” Pete said.

“Do you have your walkie-talkie?” Jupe asked quickly.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” Pete went into Headquarters, opened the filing cabinet where they had stored their equipment and took out one of the three small walkie-talkies. Then he said goodbye. “Be back in half an hour! I’ll stay in the car.”

“See you on Channel 3!” Jupiter said.

The Second Investigator got on his bike and cycled across the salvage yard to the street.

“So, now we place this beautiful briefcase into the wooden chest, Bob,” said Jupiter. They took out the tools and placed the briefcase in before covering it back with the tools. Then they pushed the chest under the table.

Jupiter gave a thumbs-up. “Perfect! Now I’m going to quickly raid Aunt Mathilda’s fridge. Who knows how long we’ll have to wait—and then it’s off to the observation posts!”

A few minutes later, he came back, loaded with biscuits and orange juice. They went into Headquarters. Suspecting that MacDunno was still listening, they deliberated where they would put the key—without mentioning that it was a fake. Finally, they decided to just hang it at one of the hooks—in line with their idea that the best hiding place was one that was not obvious. It didn’t really matter as they did not expect MacDunno to get the key, but just to play along their idea.

Jupiter had wanted to remove the bug but later decided against it in case MacDunno became suspicious if he didn’t hear anything more. Instead, he and Bob kept MacDunno’s ears busy by talking about all sorts of unrelated things from TV, school work and the like. Even though they sounded cheerful, they were actually very nervous. A slight twist in their plans could jeopardize ‘Operation Worthington’, as they had named their mission.

In the midst of keeping MacDunno entertained, both of them gathered the gear they needed. In a black backpack, they placed their mobile phone, which they had bought especially for emergencies, a roll of parcel tape and the receiver for the tracking device.

Just before it turned dark, Jupiter and Bob locked up and left Headquarters. Jupiter hoped that MacDunno would not break that new lock.

Then they went into position. Bob went out of the salvage yard, across the street and hid among some bushes. As he was facing the corner of the salvage yard, he could see cars coming from two roads. Pete would later position at another side to observe the entrance to the salvage yard.

Jupiter walked to his observation post next to Red Gate Rover. There he had a very good view of the workshop. He switched on his walkie-talkie and put it to Channel 3, sat down comfortably and started to think about the biscuits.

“Now we have to wait,” he sighed. “Thank goodness I have food with me.”

Pete had eaten something at lightning speed and explained to his parents that he had to go back because of an extensive clean-up operation at Headquarters and he couldn’t leave Jupiter and Bob alone. He also said that it might take longer and therefore he might stay overnight with Jupiter. After all, he did not know when ‘Operation Worthington’ would start and how long it would last.

Then he jumped into his red MG to go back to the salvage yard. The Three Investigators had decided to use his car because MacDunno would recognize Bob’s Beetle. The Second Investigator parked in the shade of a tree a short distance from the gate into the salvage yard so that he could see the entrance without being seen himself. He picked up the walkie-talkie.

“Second to First and Third, come in!”

“Third here,” squawked Bob’s voice from the speaker.

“In position,” Pete said. “Stomach full, everything in sight.”

“Wonderful. Well, don’t fall asleep,” Bob said. “We may have to wait a long time. Juve just suggested that we report to each other every quarter of an hour.”

“All right,” Pete said. “Then it’s not so boring.”

This time their patience was put to the test. It was midnight and nothing moved.

Shortly after 1 am, Jupiter's quarter-hour control call actually woke Pete up. "Don't let this happen to you again," the First Investigator snarled at him.

"You're funny. I'm sitting here all alone with my car radio, which only plays drowsy tra-la-la," Pete hissed back irritably.

"Well, then find a station that plays heavy metal music!" Jupiter suggested.

"You could always relieve me here!" Pete hit back.

"Sure," Jupe said.

And just at that moment, Pete cried: "Hold on! I see someone's coming!"

The atmosphere was tense as a car drove along the road and finally stopped right in front of the salvage yard. Pete looked up. He had already given a false alarm three times. Each time, it had been neighbours who came home. But this time it was a black BMW.

A small man, whose bald head shimmered in the dim street light, got out.

Hastily, Pete said into the walkie-talkie. "Second here! Bull's-eye! MacDunno has just arrived!"

"It's about time!" Bob cried.

"He looks around..." Pete provided the commentary. "Now he's climbing over the fence... He should be in sight any minute!"

Jupiter heard Pete's warning and then switched off the walkie-talkie in case he was heard. MacDunno got down from the fence and walked quietly towards Headquarters, went past it and approached the workshop. He looked around, switched on his flashlight and saw the wooden chest. He pulled it out, opened it and took out the tools. A while later, he found the briefcase and took it out. He placed the briefcase on the table and now noticed that it had a combination lock. At that very moment, Jupiter switched on the spot light and MacDunno was startled. He ran quickly back to the fence and climbed back out.

While MacDunno was at the workshop, Bob had left his observation post, ran to Pete's car and got in. Both of them watched as MacDunno climbed over the fence back onto the road, got into the car and drove off. Pete then started his car and drove around the corner towards Red Gate Rover. Jupiter was waiting there.

"Step on it!" cried Jupiter, even before he was really in the car.

Immediately after he got in, Pete drove off. Bob took the receiver out of the backpack and turned it on. A steady beep sounded. The device was not able to determine the direction of the transmitter, but the distance. The further away it was, the quieter the signal became. It still sounded clear and loud. Soon the rear lights of the BMW appeared in front of them.

"Stay as far behind him as possible, Pete," Jupiter advised. "If he notices us, it's all over."

"Yes, yes, don't panic. It's not the first time I've been tailing someone." But Pete's calm was only an act. He was as nervous as the others.

The trip took them out of Rocky Beach and into the mountains of Santa Monica. The Second Investigator always kept so much distance that he could barely see the red lights. At this time there was hardly any traffic on the small side roads. But then the BMW turned onto a main road and suddenly there were at least a dozen tail lights that were indistinguishable.

"Bummer!" Pete cried.

"Don't panic," Jupiter tried to calm Pete down. "Keep going straight. The tracking device will tell us when MacDunno leaves the road."

After about two kilometres, the beeping suddenly became quieter. "He turned off," Bob said. "Probably into that little mountain road we just passed. Turn around, Pete!"

"I'm on it!" Pete waited a moment when the road was clear, he made a U-turn and drove back. The beeping had stopped completely in the meantime.

“Damn! Hope we find him again!” He accelerated, reached the turn-off and raced into the mountains.

The road was completely deserted and in very poor condition. Were they wrong? Could MacDunno have used a different route? But at that moment the beeping sounded again and slowly became louder. And after a minute, the red lights appeared again. “Thank goodness! I thought we had lost him!” Pete sighed.

The drive went through a dense forest area, then the BMW stopped. Pete was about to brake, but Jupiter warned him: “Drive on! If you stop now, he’ll spot us right away.”

Pete drove past the BMW, which stood in a small parking bay. He stopped after the next curve. The road was lined with tall oaks. There was nothing here but forest and The Three Investigators wondered MacDunno was doing in this deserted area.

Carefully they got out of the car and sneaked back. It was pitch dark and if they were not careful, they ran straight into MacDunno. But then they saw a light that danced restlessly between the trees.

“He has a flashlight,” whispered Jupiter. “Of course we forgot about them!”

“We couldn’t use it anyway, he’d see us right away,” whispered Bob. “Go after him!”

After a few metres, they discovered a hiking trail that led through the trees up into the mountains. The trembling beam of light about fifty metres away showed them the way. Every now and then, a branch cracked under their feet or the leaves rustled so loudly that they stopped. But MacDunno didn’t seem to notice them.

After they had travelled about half a kilometre, the flashlight’s light was suddenly swallowed by a large shadow. In front of them, a wooden hut appeared, probably a forester’s shed which had been abandoned for years. A moment later, a warm light flashed up behind the dark windows, possibly from a candle.

“Let’s go ahead!” whispered Jupiter and ran. The hut was small, probably it consisted of only one room. Through the window, they saw a shadow moved.

“I’ll have a look inside,” Bob whispered. While Jupe and Pete stayed hidden among the trees, Bob quietly crept up to the wooden wall and crouched under the window. Voices could be heard, but it was so muffled that they did not understand a word. Bob got up and ducked right back down.

Excitedly he crept back quietly to his two friends. “Worthington is in there! Tied to a chair!”

“Did he see you?” Jupiter asked.

“No.”

“What’s the inside of the cabin like?” Pete asked.

“There’s nothing there, just this chair and an oil lamp on a table. He was standing in front of Worthington. But he has a gun in his hand, so we can’t just storm the hut like we’ve been planning to.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “We have to wait until he opens the briefcase—which won’t be long. To do this, he will put the gun aside. When he notices the paper, he will go completely crazy and be inattentive for a moment. Then we’ll strike!”

Bob crept back to the window and risked a second look. MacDunno was still standing in front of Worthington and talking to him. Suddenly, the chauffeur looked over MacDunno’s shoulder, saw Bob. He opened his eyes in amazement. MacDunno spun around. Bob could duck just in time.

As quietly as possible Bob walked around the corner of the hut. Not a second too soon, for the wooden door was already being ripped open and footsteps approached the spot where Bob crouched.

“There’s no one here!” growled a dark voice. It was the first time they heard MacDunno speak.

“I told you it was probably just an owl,” shouted Worthington from inside.

“You’re probably imagining things,” MacDunno said. “You won’t stop me from putting an end to your miserable life by playing tricks. I’ve waited fifteen years for this moment.”

With these words he stomped back into the hut. But this time he left the door open a crack. A brief moment later, Bob came back to the window, took another peek and waved the other two over. By the time Pete and Jupe reached the front, all three of them were able to follow the conversation.

“You won’t get far with that,” Worthington said.

“Nobody will find you up here that fast,” MacDunno said. Then he laughed hard. “Especially since no one is looking for you. Everyone thinks you’re already dead. You couldn’t have planned it any better.”

“Susanna will know what happened,” Worthington said.

“Susanna!” MacDunno literally spat the name out. “She will not open her mouth as long as she puts herself at risk. And if you’re hoping for your friends, those amateur detectives, I can assure you that the three of them are not half as smart as they think they are. They led me straight to the money.” He gloated. “But enough of the long speech. I am here to finish what began fifteen years ago. Now give me the numbers for this briefcase.”

“It’s the wrong briefcase,” Worthington suddenly said.

Jupiter flinched.

“What?” MacDunno asked incredulously.

“This is not the briefcase I left in my locker,” Worthington explained.

“What do you mean?”

“That means that this briefcase does not belong to me,” Worthington said. “Where this briefcase came from is beyond my knowledge.”

Worthington, whose voice had trembled until then, regained his inner peace and his noble nature. “You’d better make sure the money is in there before you kill the only person who can get you out of this predicament.”

“Stop playing games with me,” MacDunno growled. “I could break open this briefcase anyway. Why don’t you just tell me the combination?”

“Suit yourself,” Worthington replied. “You can try 267, but I’m telling you that that is not my briefcase.”

Jupiter who was peeking at the window, saw that MacDunno had put his gun on the table as expected.

“Sure.” MacDunno’s voice was full of suspicion. “If this is a trick, then...”

Jupiter gave his partners a sign. It was almost time! They heard click from the lock of the briefcase, and then...

“What? Paper again?”

17. “No Police, Please!”

At that very moment, Pete ripped open the door and he stormed into the hut, followed by Bob.

MacDunno was standing by the table with the briefcase opened in front of him. Shocked, he tried to grab his gun, but Pete was very fast. He rammed MacDunno against the wall. Just behind, Bob hurled the gun into the corner of the room.

Even before MacDunno could react, Pete and Bob threw themselves on him and held him down on the floor. He fought back with all his might, but when Jupiter joined in, he had no chance. Pete and Juve held MacDunno down while Bob took the tape out of his backpack and tied MacDunno’s hands to his back.

“You cursed kids!” he roared. “How did you get here? Release me!”

“Well, Mr MacDunno,” Jupiter smiled smugly. “The Three Investigators are just as smart as they think they are.” Soon MacDunno was well wrapped up and absolutely unable to move.

“So,” sighed Bob after work was done. “Back to prison, I’d say.”

“You won’t get away with this! I’m gonna give you—”

“You’ll keep your mouth shut now,” Bob countered, tearing off another strip of tape and sealing MacDunno’s mouth with it, who could now only make an angry grumble.

“Jupiter, Pete and Bob,” said Worthington with relief. “I knew I could count on you.”

“Worthington! We are so glad to see you,” cried Jupiter and immediately set about releasing the chauffeur’s shackles.

“Thank you very much,” he replied and stood up to rub his hands and ankles. “I’ve been sitting in this position for ages.” His skin was pale, his cheeks sunken and his otherwise neatly combed back hair hung in tangled strands on his face. The last few days must have taken a lot out of him. But he smiled.

“Worthington, we’ve been able to figure out a lot of things on our own, but we don’t know the whole story yet,” Jupiter said. “Please, tell us what happened! Bob, you might as well call the police.”

“No! No police, please!” cried Worthington in a panic.

“Excuse me?” asked Jupiter irritated. “But we have a criminal sitting here. What are we supposed to do with him if we don’t take him to the police?”

The chauffeur lowered his head. “I don’t know. If I had known, none of this would have happened in the first place.”

“Come on, Worthington! Tell us the story!”

“But from the beginning,” Pete asked. “Otherwise I’ll only understand half of it.”

Worthington was silent.

“Start with your sister,” Jupiter suggested. “It all started with her, didn’t it?”

“So you found out about Susanna,” Worthington said quietly.

The First Investigator nodded. “We know that she was brought in for questioning and attended court, but she was released because she was innocent.”

MacDunno growled indignantly. Jupiter hesitated for a moment, but then he gave Bob a sign. Perhaps it was useful to listen to both sides.

Bob took out the tape from their prisoner's mouth. "You wanted to say something?"

MacDunno rudely that he cried out: "Innocent? Susanna was not innocent. She took the money and got away with it! And the police, those idiots, thought it was Steve."

"She had her reasons!" Worthington defended his sister. "And you know that better than anyone, MacDunno!"

"What reasons, Worthington?" Jupiter looked it up.

Worthington sighed. "I was still living in England when my sister Susanna fell for this guy. She suspected he was up to something. I kept warning her about him, but she wouldn't listen. She was a slave to him. It went so far that she even stayed with him when he was... abusing her. He kept beating her, but she had become so deeply dependent on him that she could not part with him. He took away her money. She was out of a job and did not know how to break out of this hell. This went on for years.

"I then moved here to California. One day, she contacted me and said she knew how to free herself. But she needed my help for that. I promised her, of course, that I would support her no matter what happened." Worthington interrupted himself and swallowed hard. "That was a mistake."

"Because one day she asked you to put a briefcase full of money in a safe place," Jupiter surmised.

Worthington nodded. "Right. Susanna had found out that her friend here was deeply involved in drug deals. She decided to turn the tables and spied on him until she knew enough about the business. Then she developed a plan. She wanted to play the two gangs against each other and keep the money for herself.

"I still don't know how she did it, but she managed to exchange the briefcase just before the handover, informed the police and hid the half a million pounds. The police caught the two gangs. Their luck was that one of the criminals was killed in the shoot-out. Thus, the suspicion fell on him. When she was being questioned, I was briefly back in England to support her. It was then when she asked me to keep my promise and help her. Then she gave me the briefcase and begged me to take the money to safety. She was afraid the police would find it on her during the investigation."

"And you helped her..." Bob said.

"She is my sister."

Bob cleared his throat. "So she's not half as innocent as she looked."

"You misjudge the situation, Bob. Susanna wanted revenge on MacDunno, who had abused her repeatedly."

"Then she could have gone to the police and reported him for his illegal business," Jupiter said.

"The police..." mumbled Worthington. "Susanna went there for help whenever MacDunno beat her." Worthington stared at the bald man with disdain. "But the authorities never saw fit to intervene and get her out. After all, Susanna had half a million pounds in a briefcase. The money had been acquired through various crimes, it did not belong to anyone legally. So she was faced with the choice of turning it over to the police, who had failed her time and again, or keep it and use it to build a new life for herself.

"And she chose the latter?" Jupe asked.

"Right. When the trials were over and the gang was in prison, she moved to Australia and asked me from there to send her the money."

"But you didn't do that," Pete noted. "Why not?"

"Because it was wrong," Worthington explained. "The money was not hers. Helping her when she was in trouble was one thing, but to help her make the money disappear, it was a

very different situation. So I refused to give her the money. I just couldn't reconcile it with my moral sensibilities."

Jupiter frowned. "Then why didn't you take it to the police?"

Worthington took a deep breath. "I couldn't do that either. Firstly, I would have betrayed my sister to the police and secondly... secondly, I had a dark premonition that she would need the money one day—not to build a nice new life for herself, but to save her life, namely, at the exact moment when MacDunno was released from prison.

"Susanna was angry and kept asking me to give her the money. But I couldn't. Finally, we stopped quarrelling. For years, the money was in that safe deposit box without me ever touching it. And I haven't seen my sister for just as long."

Now Jupiter turned to MacDunno. "So you knew Susanna had the money."

He nodded angrily.

"Then why didn't you tell the police?"

"Because it was only later that I realized it. In prison, I played through the evening of the money handover over and over again until I finally realized that Steve could not have stolen the money at all. After long deliberations, only one person came into question, even though I never would have believed that Susanna was capable of doing it. But by that time she was long gone and I decided to wait until I was free again to go and get the money myself."

"So after your release you went to Australia?" Jupiter asked.

"Right."

"And there he forced Susanna to tell him where the money had gone," Worthington interfered angrily. "He threatened her until she finally told him the truth. MacDunno got on the next plane and flew here to track me down. But my sister warned me in time, although MacDunno had threatened to kill her if she did. I knew I only had a few hours left before he would show up here. So I acted rashly."

Jupiter nodded. "You sent your car plummeting down the cliffs, faking your death, hoping that MacDunno would believe the story."

"Right. What I didn't know was that at that time he was already in Los Angeles for several hours watching me. He only let me go because nothing better could have happened to him—I faked my death. It was the easiest thing I could do for him. Soon, I noticed by chance that I was being followed and was able to escape. I hid in a little motel in Thousand Oaks and waited.

"Then I slipped a CD with two clues into your headquarters and given you, Jupiter, the power of attorney to access my safe deposit box. I thought, if something unforeseen was to happen, you're the only ones who can solve it."

"We succeeded in doing that," Jupiter said proudly. "Almost, anyway. What I still don't understand, though, is how you, Mr MacDunno, found us. You appeared suddenly and followed us."

"I was on Worthington's heels the night of the alleged accident and watched him enter your salvage yard," MacDunno growled. "At first I thought he was trying to hide something on the grounds, but a few minutes later he reappeared and drove towards Malibu, where he crashed his car. Only when I lost track of Worthington did I realize that his short visit to your place was more than just a pee break. So I stuck with you. I knew you were involved in this and knew something—especially after you tricked me in the multi-storey car park."

"Phew!" moaned Pete. "I have to digest this. So much information at once is really too much for me. But one thing I've always known is that you're innocent, Worthington."

"Well, not quite," the chauffeur confessed. "After all, I've kept stolen money for fifteen years without telling anyone."

“Because you wanted to protect your sister,” Jupiter said. “I can understand that.”

“The police will see things differently. You know, it’s not about me. It’s about Susanna. She would probably go to prison because she lied in court at that time. But she doesn’t deserve this.”

“Well, after all is said and done,” Jupiter turned to MacDunno, “I have another piece of information for you, Mr MacDunno.

“I did some checks on the £500,000 worth of banknotes you were after. They were issued in the early eighties. I found out that this particular series of banknotes were no longer legal tender a few years ago. This means that you cannot use it for anything unless you exchange it for new banknotes. However, because of the age of the notes, you cannot exchange it at just any British bank, except at the Bank of England, where you have to provide your identity and probably explain how you got them. Ultimately, there is not much you could do about it without being caught sooner or later.”

MacDunno was speechless and visibly stunned. After all these efforts, he had not anticipated this.

“So...” said Jupiter with a sigh. Perplexed, he looked from Worthington to MacDunno. “So there we have a criminal tied up and half a million pounds in a safe deposit box.” Then he turned to Bob and Pete.

Bob put down the mobile phone. “If we are not calling the police, then what?”

18. A Reason to Celebrate

“It was fantastic,” Aunt Mathilda was delighted as she got out of the gold-plated Rolls-Royce in her finest evening dress, the door of which was held open by Worthington. With eyes glowing with enthusiasm she beamed at Jupiter, Pete and Bob. The Three Investigators had been waiting for them outside the salvage yard.

“A glorious evening! The dinner was a dream, and then the ballet—Swan Lake!” She gave Uncle Titus, who had appeared next to her in fancy tuxedo, a big kiss on the cheek. “Thank you so much for this wonderful birthday present! That was a really great surprise!”

Then Aunt Mathilda approached her nephew and Jupiter was also rewarded with a wet kiss. “Oh, I felt so distinguished in that magnificent carriage.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it, Aunt Mathilda,” replied Jupiter with a smile.

“So, now we bid you farewell,” Aunt Mathilda said, “Good night, you three.” Then she turned to the chauffeur. “Good night, Worthington. Thank you very much.”

“It was my pleasure,” he replied politely. Then the Jones couple disappeared into the house and The Three Investigators stayed behind with Worthington.

“Was Aunt Mathilda very exhausting?” Jupe asked, amused.

“I’ve had tougher passengers than her,” Worthington calmly replied.

Pete laughed. But then he got serious. “How are you, Worthington?”

“As well as can be expected...” the chauffeur sighed and then paused.

“We are glad that you took the step and informed the police about everything,” Bob said. “We will certainly be asked about the whole story and then of course we will put in a good word for you. I’m sure nothing much will happen to you. After all, you haven’t spent one pound of the £500,000 and you’ve only acted with the best of intentions.”

Worthington nodded. “My sister Susanna won’t get off that easily. But I’m glad she’s not mad at me anymore. I talked to her on the phone yesterday. We talked it over and she finally realized that the best thing to do is to turn herself in instead of continuing to live in hiding.”

“In any case, she doesn’t have to be afraid of MacDunno for the time being,” assured Jupiter. “He’s surely going back to prison. After all, he threatened your sister and kidnapped you. What else is on the list? Oh yeah—possession of an unlicensed firearm, multiple burglaries and a few other misdemeanours. And all this within two weeks of his release. That ought to do.”

Worthington winced. “Cotta also asked Susanna to come here from Australia. He said that something like this always looks better on the record than waiting to be officially summoned to court. She will arrive in two days.”

The First Investigator smiled encouragingly at Worthington. “Maybe you can pick her up at the airport.”

“I haven’t seen her in fifteen years,” Worthington whispered.

“Then it’s high time,” Bob said.

“Thank you,” he said softly and blinked away a tear. “... For everything.”

“It was our pleasure,” Pete mimicked Worthington’s noble accent and got a rib poke from Bob, but the chauffeur smiled.

“Oh yes, what did Mr Gelbert say?” the Second Investigator suddenly remembered.

“He was... confused, to say the least. In fact, I’ve never seen him so speechless. I tried to explain the whole story as far as it concerned him, but I think he was only listening with half an ear. In any case, I could assure him that I owe my safe return to you three, whereupon he immediately withdrew all accusations, of course.” Worthington took a deep breath once. “So I’ll be saying goodbye to you for the evening. Thanks again for your help!”

He shook hands with the three of them and was about to get into the car when Jupiter held him back. “Worthington?”

“Yeah?”

“Actually, we weren’t waiting for Aunt Mathilda, we were waiting for you.”

Bob nodded. “Because while you were gone, we noticed that we had never invited you to our headquarters. We would like to apologize for this negligence and make up for it as soon as possible.”

“There’s a bottle of champagne waiting for us in the fridge,” Pete explained. “I think we have a reason to celebrate.”

Worthington looked at the three detectives in surprise. Undecidedly he looked from one to the other. “I still have to drive,” he explained.

“Then you’ll get something non-alcoholic,” Bob said. “We still have to celebrate.”

Worthington still stood there frozen stiff.

“Come on now, Worthington. You really deserve a little relaxation among friends,” said Jupiter encouragingly.

“All right,” the chauffeur relented with a smile. “Actually... it can’t hurt.”

He closed the car door and followed The Three Investigators to Headquarters.